ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to become a librarian!

Royal Academy Stories

–First Year–

Author: Miya Kazuki

Illustrator: You Shiina

Cast of Characters

Summary of Royal Academy Stories

Upon entering the Royal Academy, Rozemyne whizzed through her classes, passing them all as quickly as possible so that she could start holing up in the library. This was bad enough, but the slew of concerning incidents she was involved with and unexpected connections she formed in the process resulted in her prompt summons back to Ehrenfest by the archduke himself. She soon found herself taking an extended leave from the Royal Academy... but what happened there while she wasn't looking?

Royal Academy Archduke Candidates

Rozemyne
The protagonist. A first-year archduke candidate from Ehrenfest, despite looking like a seven-year-old. She's an ultrarare first-in-class student who sped through her classes and formed connections with royals and top-ranking duchies before disappearing in the blink of an eye.

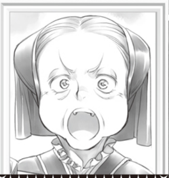
Wilfried
A first-year archduke candidate from Ehrenfest. Rozemyne's older brother, often flung around by his younger sister.

Hannelore
A first-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger. Lestilaut's little sister, often flung around by her older brother and cursed with bad timing.

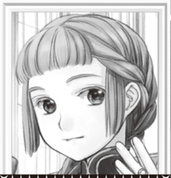
Ortwin
A first-year archduke candidate from Drewanchel. Adolphine's little brother, often flung around by his older sister.

Anastasius	A sixth-year and the Sovereignty's second prince.
Eglantine	An archduke candidate from Klassenberg.
Lestilaut	A fourth-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.
Adolphine	A fifth-year archduke candidate from Drewanchel.
Detlinde	A fourth-year archduke candidate from Ahrensbach. Georgine's daughter.
Konradin	A first-year archduke candidate from Gaussbuttel.
Dahvidh	A first-year archduke candidate from Lindenthal.
Rudiger	A fifth-year archduke candidate from Frenbeltag.

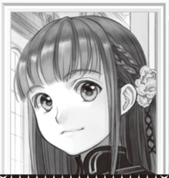
Rozemyne's Retainers



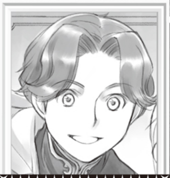
Rihyarda
Head attendant. An archnoble who cared for Ferdinand, Sylvester, and Karstedt when they were kids.



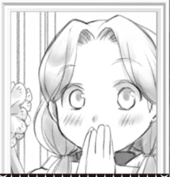
Lieseleta
Angelica's little sister and a fourth-year apprentice medattendant.



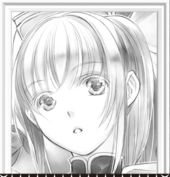
Brunhilde
A third-year apprentice archattendant.



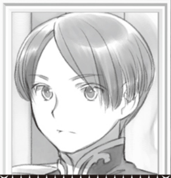
Hartmut
A fifth-year apprentice archscholar. Ottilie's son.



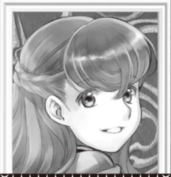
Philine
A second-year apprentice layscholar.



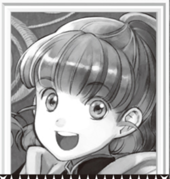
Angelica
Lieseleta's older sister and a medknight.



Cornelius
Karstedt's son and a fifth-year apprentice archknight.



Leonore
A fourth-year apprentice archknight.



Judithe
A second-year apprentice medknight.

Ottilie
·····Hartmut's mother and an archattendant.

Damuel
·····A layknight.

Students in the Ehrenfest Dormitory

Alexis·············A fourth-year apprentice archknight serving Wilfried.
Isidore···········A third-year apprentice archattendant serving Wilfried.
Ignaz··············A second-year apprentice archscholar serving Wilfried.
Gregor···········A first-year apprentice archknight serving Wilfried.
Traugott·······A third-year apprentice archknight serving Rozemyne. Rihyarda's grandson.
Roderick········A first-year apprentice medscholar.
Katinka·········A first-year apprentice medattendant.
Elias················A first-year apprentice medknight.

Other Nobles in the Ehrenfest Dormitory

Oswald················Wilfried's head attendant.
Justus··················Ferdinand's scholar. Rihyarda's son.
Gudrun················Traugott's mother. Justus's alias when cross-dressing.
Kashmir··············Roderick's attendant.
Frederika············Judithe's attendant.
Isberga···············Philine's attendant.

Students from Other Duchies

Rasantark	A first-year apprentice archattendant from Dunkelfelger. Lestilaut's retainer.
Kenntrips	A second-year apprentice archscholar from Dunkelfelger. Lestilaut's retainer.
Clarissa	A fourth-year apprentice archscholar from Dunkelfelger.
Anselm	A first-year apprentice medscholar from Berschmann.

Royal Academy Professors

Hirschur	Ehrenfest's dorm supervisor. Ferdinand's teacher.
Primevere	Klassenberg's dorm supervisor.
Rauffen	Dunkelfelger's dorm supervisor.
Gundolf	Drewanchel's dorm supervisor.
Fraularm	Ahrensbach's dorm supervisor.
Pauline	Frenbeltag's dorm supervisor. Music instructor.
Solange	The Royal Academy's librarian.

Other Royal Academy Figures

Schwartz	A library magic tool.
Weiss	A library magic tool.
Cordula	Hannelore's head attendant.

Ehrenfest's Nobles

Ferdinand	Sylvester's half-brother and Rozemyne's guardian. Known as ditter's Lord of Evil.
Sylvester	The archduke. Wilfried's father and Rozemyne's adoptive father.
Florencia	Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.
Charlotte	Wilfried and Rozemyne's little sister. Not yet attending the Academy.
Bonifatius	Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.
Karstedt	The knight commander. Rozemyne's noble father.
Elvira	Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.
Eckhart	Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.
Lamprecht	Wilfried's guard knight. Karstedt's son.
Brigitte	Rozemyne's former guard knight who returned to Illgner.
Veronica	Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.

Nobles Elsewhere

Sigiswald	The Sovereignty's first prince.
Nahelache	Sigiswald's wife.
Clemens	Fraularm's predecessor. Deceased.
Heisshitze	Nephew of the Dunkelfelger knight commander.
Georgine	Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

Temple Attendants

Fran	In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.
Zahm	In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.
Nicola	A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.
Monika	A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.
Gil	In charge of the workshop.
Fritz	In charge of the workshop.
Wilma	In charge of the orphanage.

Rozemyne's Personnel

Ella	Personal chef.
Hugo	Personal chef.
Rosina	Personal musician.

Table of Contents

Cover
Color Illustrations
Characters

Solange — Prologue
Cornelius — As a Guard Knight and a Brother
Roderick — One Day in the Royal Academy
Hannelore — Careless Mumbles Lead to Ditter
Rauffen — Wondrous Ditter
Wilfried — An Inelegant Time at the Royal Academy
Hannelore — Cursed with Such Unfortunate Timing
Wilfried — Tea Parties for Girls
Angelica — A Guard Knight at the Temple
Judithe — A Guard Knight Always Left Behind
Hartmut — Dunkelfelger Women
Wilfried — Male Socializing
Traugott — A Worse Punishment than Expected
Wilfried — Uncle’s Retainer
Hannelore — Ehrenfest’s Tea Party
Ortwin — The Drewanchel Siblings
Hannelore — Ehrenfest’s Books
Solange — Closed-Stack Archives and the Old Diaries

Map of Ehrenfest Duchy

Map of Yurgenschmidt

Afterword

A Comfy Life with My Family by You Shiina

Bonus High Resolution Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Solange — Prologue

“Oh my. Has the Drewanchel Dormitory closed too?” I asked Gundolf upon seeing him in the dining hall. He was the duchy’s dormitory supervisor, and it was rare for him to be here so early in the year; the higher population of greater duchies meant their students took several more days to leave than lesser duchies.

“We closed it this afternoon,” Gundolf replied. “Given how many professors are here, it seems most dormitories are closed already.”

When the students all returned to their duchies, they brought the servants and chefs who had been working in their dormitories back with them. The dormitories were subsequently closed—otherwise, the only ones inside would be the knights guarding the teleportation circle—and the supervisors started eating in the dining hall for professors. One could trace the closing of the dormitories by the increasing busyness of the dining hall.

“It was quite a handful, since many students had no desire to return home,” Gundolf continued. “I find myself envying how your library is able to close as soon as classes do.”

“Not quite,” I said. “There are some who wait until the day their dormitories close to return their books, and there are some who even visit to study for their remedial classes.”

The library under my command closed only when I finished all my work following the Archduke Conference. In the past, the overwhelming workload had taken me much too long to complete, but thanks to Schwartz and Weiss’s presence this year, it seemed feasible that I might be able to close the library and go to the Sovereignty’s palace library for the first time in what seemed like forever.

“I saw Primevere here as well, so am I right to assume Dunkelfelger is the only dormitory that has yet to close?” I asked, double-checking that Rauffen wasn’t coming to the dining hall.

Gundolf shook his head. “I have heard that Neuehausen, Losrenger, and Quandtreeb are also keeping their dormitories open due to having students with remedial classes. They may be visiting the library."

"Oh my. I thank you ever so much for telling me."

Neuehausen, Losrenger, and Quandtreeb had dropped to being bottom-ranking duchies after losing the civil war, and they had neither the manpower nor wealth to dedicate to education. As a result, their grades were decreasing with each passing year, and their students were becoming increasingly more involved in thefts and the disappearance of reading material. There was often very little I could do about that, but thanks to Lady Rozemyne, I could now have Schwartz and Weiss assist in sending out warnings, which was enough to help me manage.

"This year, every single Ehrenfest student was able to attain better grades," came a voice. "I hear that not a single one needed to wait until the date of the final offered exam."

I instinctively turned upon hearing someone talk about Ehrenfest, perhaps because I had just been thinking about Lady Rozemyne. It appeared that Hirschur was talking to other professors of the scholar course.

"My sole concern this year was whether Angelica would graduate, but thanks to Lady Rozemyne, she graduated without incident," Hirschur replied.

Any duchies with students taking remedial classes had to keep their dorms open for them, with chefs and servants staying behind as well. This placed a burden on the duchy, so the dormitory supervisors were tasked with doing everything in their power to get these students to pass and return home. Hirschur grumbled about one spring several years ago when Angelica had needed to attend remedial classes and the misery she had endured trying to get her through them.

"Now, I can finally focus on my research," Hirschur concluded.

"My my. Are you not always immersed in your research?" another professor asked, prompting giggles from the others. Perhaps Hirschur had already forgotten how she was reprimanded by Prince Anastasius after abandoning her class to research Schwartz and Weiss.

"Still, you always leap right into your research as soon as your dormitory is closed," a third professor noted. "Most dormitory supervisors remain busy until the Archduke Conference is complete."

Indeed, most Sovereign nobles returned to their home duchies in the winter to collect intel. Dormitory supervisors needed to gather information from them to prepare for the Archduke Conference, meaning there were still a variety of small tasks they had to carry out even once the Royal Academy term was over.

There was, however, one person who was seemingly exempt from all this: Hirschur, who lived in the scholar building and rarely visited the Ehrenfest Dormitory at all.

"You sure do have it rough," she said. "I wish you all well."

"Hirschur, this applies to you too," a male professor said. "You should expect there to be a fuss about Lady Rozemyne at the next Archduke Conference."

"Almost certainly, but that has nothing to do with me. I have not heard anything from the aub, so I'll simply need to perform my research as per usual and wait for the conference to end."

And with that, Hirschur stood up, having finished her meal; she presumably intended to rush straight back to her laboratory to carry out some more research. I recalled her frequent requests to borrow Schwartz and Weiss from me, although I was unable to agree while their master Lady Rozemyne was absent.

"Solange, who sent out the overdue book ordonnanzes this year?" the Ossvault dormitory supervisor suddenly asked me. "Aub Ossvault has been very curious."

Several other professors immediately glanced over—the supervisors of duchies whose students had received the terrifying reminders from Lord Ferdinand, no doubt. Only duchies that had slacked on returning books knew what we were talking about, meaning the other supervisors and the normal professors were unfamiliar with the ordonnanzes.

"I received the help of a friendly visitor," I replied. "Thanks to them, all the books and documents were returned this year. I am ever so grateful."

"They did not sound particularly friendly..."

I was familiar with the message that Lord Ferdinand had spoken into the ordonnanzes, and indeed, his voice would send chills down the spine of anyone called by name. Still, I had no intention of revealing his identity.

"Please remind your students to return their books sooner next year," I said with a smile, evading the question entirely. I then returned to my meal and made my way back to the library once I was finished.

“Solange is back.”

“Food time is over.”

I had completely forgotten how heartwarming it was to be welcomed upon returning home. It was thanks to Lady Rozemyne that I could once again work with Schwartz and Weiss, and this year’s term had given me many very special memories to cherish.

“You know, Schwartz, Weiss... what say we reflect on this past year at the Royal Academy together?”

Cornelius — As a Guard Knight and a Brother

"Next is Cornelius," Mother said while overseeing the attendants and servants moving my luggage onto the teleportation circle.

I was leaving for the Royal Academy today. Rozemyne wasn't here because she was busy with Lord Ferdinand, cramming for her upcoming lessons. She had given a sad nod when everyone informed her that she needed to prioritize her own preparations over seeing me off, and now, the only ones here were Mother and Eckhart.

"I didn't expect you to come, Eckhart," I remarked. I had been certain that he would prioritize guarding Lord Ferdinand, although I didn't voice that thought. Even Father and Lamprecht had stuck to guard duty rather than coming to see me off.

"I am here only because Lord Ferdinand ordered me to come in Rozemyne's place," he replied.

So you wouldn't have come otherwise. Yeah, that's the Eckhart I'm used to.

I nodded at his explanation, at which point Eckhart put on a serious expression and said, "From this day forward, you'll be living in the Royal Academy as Rozemyne's guard knight—and most importantly, as her brother. Your time there is completely different when your lord or lady is attending too. Your life begins to center around them." It was an unexpected warning from the man who had just moments ago said that he was only here by order.

"I feel that my life already centers around Rozemyne..." I replied. On the day I had failed to protect her, I had resolved to become stronger than any other guard knight and secure the highest grades I could possibly manage in the Royal Academy. It was fair to say that she was the focus of my life, but despite my protests, Eckhart shook his head.

"No, Ehrenfest and the Royal Academy are two different beasts.

Damuel cannot go to the Academy, and you're of a higher status than Angelica, so you, her older brother, will be leading her guards."

"I understand that already..."

"No, you don't. Not in a real sense. Rihyarda is going to be the only adult retainer you can talk to, and even then, attendants deal with separate work entirely. She won't be able to give advice from the perspective of a knight, and if you absorb her words without considering that, you'll start messing up your duties."

Now, I was a little worried. I started to contemplate my situation, and Eckhart smiled at that. He gave the teleportation circle a nostalgic look, as if reminiscing about the past.

"This is just my own experience," he said, "but the more loyally you try to serve your lord or lady in the Royal Academy, the more you'll suffer. It also becomes much easier to slack, since you're going to have classes and other excuses available to you. This will be a good opportunity to see just what kind of guard knight you wish to be. You can't rely on your parents at the Academy, so your time there will force you to grow whether you want to or not." He clenched one hand into a tight fist and extended it to me. "Good luck."

I reached out and bumped my fist against his. Apparently, the Royal Academy was where guard knights sank or swam—and the intimidating light in Eckhart's blue eyes very firmly urged me toward the latter.

"As her older brother, I will strive to be a worthy guard knight," I declared, making a vow between knights.

Eckhart grinned and took a step back, which prompted Mother to step forward in turn. "Rozemyne has just awakened from a two-year slumber, meaning she is emotionally two years behind the other students," she said. "We have determined that she should attend the Royal Academy now rather than bear the permanent mark of attending one year late, but I am still ever so worried for her. It is very possible that she will come off as inferior to the other archduke candidates in many ways."

Attending the Royal Academy one year late also meant graduating one year late, which in turn meant being recognized as an adult later than usual. Everyone would treat her harshly, and she would receive far fewer opportunities for marriage. With all that in mind, it was much better for one to attend the Royal Academy prematurely and attain worse grades than to wait.

However, unlike Mother, I wasn't worried about Rozemyne's grades. She had complained about the education Lord Wilfried was receiving right after her baptism, begun selling her own educational tools, and read through the knight course's entire syllabus before Angelica—although she claimed to have done it for Angelica's sake. It was hard to imagine first-year lessons posing any challenge to her whatsoever.

"She's being educated by Lord Ferdinand, so I can't imagine she will encounter any problems in her written lessons. Considering her poor health, however, I'm *extremely* worried about her practical ones..." I said and then listed out all the things she had done in just a single year after her baptism.

Mother fell into thought for a moment; then, she gave a gentle smile. "In that case, focus on her health above all else, and do all that you can to ensure she finishes her first year safely."

"Of course. I won't let her be put in harm's way again."

"Her retainers will soon be selected," Mother said, "but as this is being done in the same year she enters the Royal Academy, the decisions cannot be made among parents. Here, the Leisegangs will surely make their move. Keep a sharp eye on factions in the Royal Academy and report your findings to us."

That, too, sounded like an enormous pain. I recalled how Hartmut was aiming to be Rozemyne's retainer and held back the urge to groan.

"We do not wish for Rozemyne to become the next aub," Mother continued, "and neither does Rozemyne herself. I only hope we can make the Leisegangs understand that..."

"That burden is too great for me to bear," I said, stiffening as I thought over all the highly... *unique* and strong-spirited nobles of the Leisegang faction.

Mother gave a wry smile. "Oh, but you need only work for Rozemyne's sake, no?"

"What makes you say that?"

"I am your mother, Cornelius. I am well aware how hard you have been working the past two years. You have become an older brother of whom Rozemyne can be proud." Her kind words sent a storm of pride, awkwardness, and joy rushing through my heart as I stepped onto the teleportation circle.

I needed to wait while my luggage was taken to my room and any final preparations were made. Laynobles and mednobles apparently helped with this process, but I was leaving everything to my retainers and instead went straight to the common room, as I did every year.

"Hey, Cornelius," Hartmut said as he made his way over. "It's finally time for me to officially become Lady Rozemyne's retainer. I can hardly believe it." The broad smile on his face practically oozed joy—or perhaps "euphoria" was a more accurate word. Either way, it was kind of gross to see. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he was happier now than he had ever been in his life.

I was struck with the urge to turn around and leave the common room outright, but I stood my ground, not wanting to look like I was turning tail and running away.

It's baffling. Hartmut wasn't this much of a weirdo back when I first met him...

Anyone would agree that he had always been the very embodiment of an archnoble—someone who skillfully carried out their job while keeping their emotions expertly hidden. And yet, seeing Rozemyne give that blessing during her baptism ceremony had shaken him to his core. He had wasted no time in asking his mother to let him become Rozemyne's retainer at once.

Thank the gods Ottilie stopped him.

Ottilie was already serving as Rozemyne's attendant, so a recommendation from her would very likely have granted Hartmut's wish, but this abrupt change in her son had come as too much of a surprise. She had asked him to wait a year for his emotions to settle—a very necessary decision, in my opinion, and one that I was particularly grateful for. Even after that year passed, however, the flames of Hartmut's devotion burned just as bright. In fact, it seemed that having to wait two years while Rozemyne was asleep had made his loyalty to her stronger still.

"Hartmut, why are you so confident that you're going to be chosen?" I asked. "Ottilie might recommend you, but I certainly won't." He radiated the aura of someone who was going to be a huge pain in the neck, and as Rozemyne's brother, I didn't want him anywhere near her.

Hartmut brushed off my glare and struck his chest with confidence. "No matter what you say, Cornelius, I'll be chosen to become Lady Rozemyne's retainer. I'm an archnoble honor student who's been probed about serving Lord Wilfried or Lady Charlotte countless times before, and my mother is already Lady Rozemyne's attendant. All other worthwhile Ehrenfest nobles have been taken by the archduke's other children, so I'll obviously be their first pick for Lady Rozemyne's apprentice scholar."

His confidence was more irritating than I could describe with words, but he was completely right—most nobles of Rozemyne's age had already been taken by Lord Wilfried or Lady Charlotte, so she didn't have many candidates left. It would make sense to pick Hartmut on the grounds that he was Ottilie's son alone, but he was also an honor student, and to most people... Well, he *was* sociable. Only a select few knew what he was really like on the inside.

"So I'm gonna have to work with you, huh...?" I muttered. "Can't say I'm too pleased about that."

"I wonder how best to spread the glory of the Saint of Ehrenfest to other duchies... Her achievements have been mostly hand-waved up to this point, but I expect everything to become a lot more believable once she's here in person. I can hardly wait."

"Please, stop!"

It was unbearable. All throughout Rozemyne's slumber, Hartmut had gone on and on about the Saint of Ehrenfest, spreading the good word all through the Royal Academy. Now, even the students of other duchies had started to tease me. "Look, it's the Saint's brother!" they would say. And now, Hartmut was suggesting that things were about to get worse.

"You know she's sickly, right?" I said. "Do you think a proper retainer should be putting that kind of burden on her? The most important thing for Rozemyne right now is finishing her first year safely and without incident. As her guard knight, I'll stop you from causing her problems no matter what it takes."

"I'll make sure I'm careful and that what I'm doing here doesn't cause her too much trouble," Hartmut replied. He hadn't agreed to stop his antics entirely, but he did look a bit more thoughtful as he left the common room.

I kept a close eye on Hartmut after that, and it turned out he wasn't just reveling in excitement for what was to come. Rather, he was positively dedicated to his studies, saying he "needed grades suitable for a retainer serving Lady Rozemyne." I decided that I, too, would do well to study a bit before Rozemyne got here. I was simply reviewing the content rather than starting from scratch, since I had already learned a lot from Damuel while working in the Raise Angelica's Grades Squadron. I was only entering my fifth year at the Academy, but it seemed safe to assume that I was knowledgeable enough to secure high grades even in the sixth-year lessons.

I wonder how Angelica's going to do, though...

Thoughts of her flashed through my mind. She had joined her fellow knights in gathering materials with the apprentice scholars and attendants almost every single day thus far, but now, her lady Rozemyne was going to be here. There was little point in me dwelling on Angelica, though—I wouldn't need to go through the trouble of convincing her to study, since Rozemyne could just order her to.

The first-years were due to arrive at the Royal Academy today, and it was the job of the senior students to guide the wide-eyed newbies to the common room. Rozemyne and Lord Wilfried were attending this year, so the apprentice attendants were working even harder than usual.

Brunhilde's probably aiming to be Rozemyne's retainer too.

I knew she had received training as the heir of Giebe Groschel, so she likely intended to form close bonds with the archducal family and eventually marry a husband with whom she could manage her province. It was a certainty that her Leisegang faction family was giving her much advice.

The first-year archnoble arrived while I was looking over the common room. Upon seeing him, I went straight to the teleportation hall with Angelica; Rozemyne was due to come next.

"Welcome to the Royal Academy, Lady Rozemyne."

Once Rozemyne had entered the common room, those serving Lord Wilfried promptly left to welcome him. As we guard knights invited Rozemyne to the seat prepared for her, I stayed attentive to make sure nobody came too close; I got the impression that those who wished to be her retainer were buzzing around nearby, trying to find a way to get in her good graces. Strangely enough, Hartmut wasn't among them, despite so passionately wishing to join her service.

Just what in the world is he doing?

I glanced around the room, suspicious, and saw him staring in our direction with an overwhelmingly confident grin. His cockiness irritated me, but my attention was almost immediately drawn elsewhere as Rozemyne expressed a sudden interest in the children of the former Veronica faction. I made sure to explain the role factions played as clearly as I could, but even then, she didn't seem very convinced. I wanted to cradle my head in agony.

Please, not this. I'd take Hartmut over those children any day.

Maybe she simply didn't understand that the former Veronica faction was responsible for her two-year coma. No, she had to know that; Lord Ferdinand had surely drilled such knowledge into her head. But why, then, did she want to take them as her retainers anyway? I just didn't understand what she was thinking.

As I saw Rozemyne off to her room, unable to accompany her due to being a man, I couldn't help but grit my teeth. *I'm sure Rihyarda will expertly convince her against this, but... I'm still worried.*

I was in my room planning for Angelica's studies, reviewing Eckhart's documents, and going over the schedule Damuel had prepared for her when Rihyarda came to tell me about the retainer candidates. "We've narrowed them down," she said. "Do probe the male retainers for us, Cornelius."

"You want *me* to do that?"

"Indeed. This would normally be the job of an apprentice scholar, but milady does not yet have one. In an ideal world, we would also have Angelica inform the female candidates, but the very idea of trusting her with a message is terrifying. Instead, I will handle it myself."

I understood how Rihyarda felt all too well. The idea terrified me too; nobody could predict what kind of slipups might occur.

"For apprentice knights, we intend to probe Leonore, Traugott, and Judithe," Rihyarda continued. "For apprentice attendants, Lieseleta and Brunhilde. And for apprentice scholars, Hartmut and Philine."

"I guess there was no avoiding Hartmut..."

"Of course; he is Ottilie's son and especially skilled. Milady is also set on taking Philine as a retainer, and she will need an archscholar to look after her."

It was clear that Rihyarda was against Rozemyne taking Philine into her service, and for good reason—no normal member of the archducal family would willingly accept a mana-sparse laynoble as their retainer. It was for this same reason that people wondered why Rozemyne showed no intention of dismissing Damuel.

"I expect that Philine will become the target of much envy due to her status," Rihyarda explained, "and she will find a tremendous burden placed upon her as a result. To make matters worse, unlike Damuel, who was ordered to visit the temple as punishment and only then received praise for his work ethic, she will have no defense. Do you believe this is something she will be able to endure? I am most concerned that milady is on the verge of ruining this young girl's life."

"I can't deny that Philine is going to struggle, but even if she doesn't become Rozemyne's retainer, she has already sworn loyalty to her. I trust that she can handle it." She had been extremely moved by all the praise Rozemyne had showered upon her for the stories she had gathered over the past two years, and the memory of when she had sworn loyalty to Rozemyne in the playroom was still fresh in my mind. "Most of the requests must have been from Leisegangs, right? I'm glad to see this selection isn't as biased toward them as I'd expected."

"Lady Elvira asked that we aim for as many neutral nobles as possible. Traugott was included at his own request."

Traugott, huh...? I've known him since we were little kids, but we've never been good friends. Not sure things are going to go well with him.

Traugott was Bonifatius's grandson. He was always hostile toward me, maybe because we were almost the same age, and I could see working with him becoming something of a chore if that continued. Surely he wouldn't bring those kinds of personal feelings to the workplace, though.

"So, he didn't choose to serve Lord Wilfried, huh?" I asked. "I heard that Lady Gudrun served Lady Georgine before she got married. Traugott's close to the former Veronica faction, and he seemed to get along with Wilfried in the winter playroom, so I was sure he'd go for him."

Traugott's mother, Gudrun, was Rihyarda's daughter. They were more attached to the archducal family than they were to the Leisegangs, so despite being neutral, he was still close to the former Veronica faction.

"If you want to look at it like that," Rihyarda said, "you should know that I've served Lady Veronica, Lady Georgine, and Lord Karstedt in the past."

“Wait. Father too?”

“That’s right. I’ve never considered myself as belonging to any particular faction, though. My family has always served the archducal family, and my loyalty lies with Ehrenfest. I am a neutral archnoble who serves whomever the aub orders me to.”

Rihyarda was similarly serving Rozemyne at the archduke’s order. Maybe it was safe to interpret her less as a loyal retainer, and more as a loyal servant of the aub.

“Traugott should serve faithfully once he has a lord or lady,” Rihyarda continued. “We have always supported Ehrenfest under the archducal family. I was trained and educated to this end, and I trust that Traugott’s parents trained and educated him in the same way.”

Once her explanation was complete, Rihyarda left to carry out her duties. I needed to inform Hartmut and Traugott that they had been chosen, so I called them to my room via ordonnanz.

“Hartmut, Traugott—you’re being asked to become Lady Rozemyne’s retainers,” I told them once they arrived. “Not only was she raised in the temple, but she has also spent two long years asleep in a jureve, so she presumably has many shortcomings that other archduke candidates do not. Will you be able to serve her nonetheless?”

“I will serve her well and in all sincerity,” they both replied. Hartmut’s expression was one of uncontrollable joy, while Traugott looked deadly serious.

Life as a guard knight in the Royal Academy seemed to be going well. Damuel wasn’t here to offer his opinions on scheduling and the like, but I was fortunate enough to have Leonore with me, and we were figuring things out together.

“Lady Rozemyne has far fewer guard knights than Lord Wilfried,” I said. “Keeping up shifts is going to be a struggle until everyone’s finished their classes...” I was starting to believe I would need to do it all on my own, but Leonore eased my worries with a gentle smile.

“I believe we will manage,” she replied. “I expect to pass the majority of my written lessons on the first day.”

“That’d be a big help. After tutoring Angelica so much, I’m pretty sure I’ll pass all of mine on the first day too.”

The two of us working together would make things much easier. Traugott was an archnoble, meaning he had presumably studied enough to secure good grades, so I expected that he would join us soon as well.

"The problem is Judithe..." I noted.

"This certainly was sudden for her. In the long term, I think it would be better for her to prioritize her education and try to attain the highest grades she can than to hurry to begin guard duty. We can assign her to guarding Lady Rozemyne when she is in her room and elsewhere in the dormitory."

It was extremely heartening to have Leonore here with me, since only girls were allowed into Rozemyne's room and Angelica couldn't be relied on for pretty much anything. Angelica had recommended Leonore, though, so I supposed that was something to thank her for.

Just as I was beginning to think we could manage with the few guard knights available to us, Lord Wilfried made a remark he really shouldn't have. Something inside Rozemyne seemed to snap, and she began a full-speed charge toward the library. As an apology for my little sister going on a rampage when told to have all the first-years pass their written lessons on the first day, I felt the need to protect Philine as much as I could. Scheduling everyone's guard duty was unfathomably easier than stopping that obsessive booklover.

For the most part, Rozemyne was oblivious to our struggles and focused instead on passing all of her classes on the first day. It seemed as though she was being stubborn to prove a point, but also like she was in a bit of a panic, as if she expected the library to be snatched away from her if she didn't act fast enough. As she barreled through her studies, she also managed to outrage Professor Fraularm in her highbeast class and ended up having an exchange with Prince Anastasius during her dedication whirl class. She was moving from one dangerous predicament to another, but as far as her grades were concerned, there was absolutely nothing to worry about—she was passing her classes one after another.

"What?! You want to go to the library *alone*?!" I exclaimed. "Don't be ridiculous!"

Rozemyne had asked to venture to the library by herself after finally completing her classes and learning from the mistakes she had made when communicating with Professor Solange. I had ended up responding to her as her brother rather than her guard knight, but since we were in the dormitory, nobody seemed to take issue.

"But, I mean, I would feel bad forcing any of you to accompany me when you haven't finished your classes yet," she said.

"If you feel bad, how about just not going?"

"That simply isn't an option. I came to the Royal Academy solely to visit the library, and Ferdinand gave me permission to go there the moment all of my classes were done."

My little sister couldn't be swayed when it came to the library—that much I already knew. She had been the same way before her baptism; when I once suggested rewarding her progress in her studies with a trip to our family estate's book room, she had gotten so excited that she passed out on the way there. She had awakened the next morning with a terrible fever, but even then, she had thrown herself down onto the floor and tried to crawl to the book room. In our current situation, there was no way I could stop her from going to the Royal Academy library when she had permission from both Lord Wilfried and Lord Ferdinand.

"Archduke candidates need to have retainers with them," I said. "I understand that you're trying to be considerate, but acting alone as you're suggesting will only trouble us even more. Do you still not understand this, even after the attack two years ago?"

"But you have your classes..."

"That's why you have several retainers and why we're scheduling your library visits for when we don't need to attend our lessons. If you want to be mindful of your retainers, don't ever go off on your own. We'd all be beside ourselves with worry, fearful that something might happen."

Rozemyne wilted and said, "Sorry, Cornelius." It seemed that she was more prone to accepting my advice when I gave her a scolding as her brother, rather than when I tried to politely explain things as her guard knight. I took that lesson to heart, and from that point onward, I spoke to her as family while we were in the dormitory—when the situation allowed for it, of course.

It was a relief to know that Rozemyne wouldn't be acting alone, but day after day, the situation changed. There came a tea party in the library, another with the music professors, a summons from royalty... My hands were full just trying to keep up with the slew of developments.

Now I understood all too well what Eckhart had meant when he said that the more loyal a guard knight was, the harder they would find things in the Royal Academy. During the two years Rozemyne had slept, I had striven to become worthy of serving her; I had trained hard and raised my grades until I was sure that, this time, I could protect her. But her demands surpassed anything I could have expected.

Worse still, before I could even find my footing with the Rozemyne situation, I found myself serving as an intermediary between Lord Wilfried and the Leisegangs. Lamprecht had asked me to take on this role. He had said that Lord Wilfried considered himself part of the same faction as the aub and Lady Florencia, but that ever since the Ivory Tower incident, the other nobles in the duchy had stopped seeing things that way.

Me, looking after another archduke candidate? How can I do that?! My hands are full serving Rozemyne!

As much as I wanted to scream, both Father and Mother had said that since Rozemyne didn't intend to become the next aub, I needed to prop up Lord Wilfried as best I could. To be honest, though, with Rozemyne being such an absurd child prodigy, it was only a matter of time before people began pushing for her to take the seat instead. Hartmut was already running around in the shadows, pulling strings, and doing who knew what else—not that I had the time or energy to stop him.

Hm? Wait a moment. I've just realized something terrible.

Rozemyne had only awoken from her jureve this year. In other words, she had managed to start a library-inspired rampage and was leading the Ehrenfest Dormitory by order of the aub while she was still unwell. She wasn't even acting at her full capacity.

There's been so much chaos already, and she can barely even move! How bad are things going to be next year when she's actually recovered a bit more?

My head throbbed at the very thought, but there was nothing for me to gain from dwelling on the future. I didn't have the time for it, anyway. Instead, I simply followed my eagerly grinning little sister to the library, all the while trying to work out whom I could ask to handle guard duty tomorrow.

Roderick — One Day in the Royal Academy

“Farewell, everyone,” Rozemyne said, seeing us off to our classes as she always did. She spotted Philine and me among the leaving senior students and gave a warm smile. “You two have geography today, I believe. Pay close attention to your professors.”

Philine and I had narrowly passed our history and geography exams, but only after tearfully begging our professors to let us. They had eventually conceded, but only on the condition that we alone, out of all the first-years, start attending their lessons.

The classes had only half as many students as when we had taken the exam, namely because the archnobles and archduke candidates of other duchies were passing in droves. That left only the laynobles and mednobles, which made things feel particularly sparse.

I entered the class, then blinked in surprise. The students were all gathered at the front for some reason, which made it seem as though there were more people in attendance than usual.

Are we in the wrong room?

“Did something happen, I wonder?” Philine asked, looking similarly uneasy as she eyed our surroundings. A girl in a light-blue cape must have overheard as she was passing by because she stopped and turned to us.

“Now that all the archnobles and archduke candidates have passed, they must have changed the seating arrangements,” she said. “My older sister told me this would happen.”

The students from other duchies had already been told about this by their seniors, so they weren’t as uncertain, but we weren’t so lucky. We had only been studying with others from our grade, and since we first-years had all passed at once, the older students hadn’t thought this kind of thing was necessary to mention.

“I thank you ever so much. I was feeling quite uneasy...” Philine replied. And with that, we began searching for our new seats. It seemed they were numbered according to the duchy rankings.

"Here. These are the thirteens," I said. There were two chairs at the very center of one row, right between the twelves and fourteens. Up until now, the students of each duchy had sat together and away from the other duchies, but now, the students all moved to fill the gaps.

"I feel a little tense, sitting next to students of other duchies," Philine muttered, hugging her belongings to her chest. I shrugged and set my things on the chair next to a seat labeled twelve.

"It can't be any worse than sitting next to high-ranking students from our own duchy."

During the hunting tournament two years ago, I had followed my father's instructions and played with Wilfried, only to end up committing an unforgivable crime. Ever since then, the friends I had once spent time with had started calling me a traitor to the archducal family, and everyone looked at me with cold eyes—even those of my own faction.

Lady Rozemyne's terrifying proclamation that all first-years would need to pass their written lessons on the first day had made me tremble with fear, but the ensuing struggle had formed tight bonds between us. Now, I was no longer being ostracized. Not to mention, students from the other duchies didn't know how I was treated at home. It was much easier being in class with them than being in the dormitory.

"Erm, Lord Roderick..." Philine said in a hushed voice, sitting in a seat next to one labeled fourteen. "You've been going to the library on the same days as Lady Rozemyne, have you not? Entirely as if you were serving her. This is just, um, a thought... but is it possible that you feel as uncomfortable in the dormitory as you did in the playroom last year? Would you like me to speak with Lady Rozemyne about it?"

Refusing her would mean being stuck in my current situation, but who knew what kind of information would leak to the former Veronica faction if I agreed. Neither was a good response. I thought about it for a moment, then shook my head.

"I use the more distant carrels, so as long as nobody stops me from going there, there's nothing to worry about. I'm writing a story for Lady Rozemyne right now, so..."

Philine seemed to guess my intentions. "Lady Rozemyne will surely rejoice," she whispered, her eyes cast downward in a forlorn look that I could only half see. It was probably because she was the only one to have been chosen as Lady Rozemyne's retainer, despite us both having written and gathered stories in the playroom. "I must ask, though—what will you do when she is sent home for the Dedication Ritual, Lord Roderick?"

A shiver ran down my spine; it was like someone had seized me by the heart. So long as I went to the library at the same time as Lady Rozemyne, nobody would bother me, and I could spend my time there in peace. I hadn't even considered what might happen when she left.

"Who knows?" I said. "I'll think about it when it happens."

"The truth is, I've been dwelling on the same thing... I'm safe now while Lady Rozemyne's here, but people still envy and feel vengeful toward me."

I couldn't help but recoil, well aware that even I had shared in those spiteful thoughts about her—about how she was receiving such special treatment despite only being a laynoble. Philine must have sensed that, even though it remained unspoken; such strong feelings of malice were sickeningly easy to detect. But even with all that in mind, my frustration about her getting to be Lady Rozemyne's retainer didn't fade.

"I don't think you'll need to worry with Lord Hartmut here," I said. "At least you have someone to protect you." No sooner had the words escaped me than I pressed my lips together, conscious that my tone had sounded unnecessarily sharp. Before I could say anything, however, a hand reached out for the chair next to Philine, and a purple cape caught my eye.

"Excuse me," the new arrival said. "I am Anselm of Berschmann. Pleased to meet you."

"I am Philine of Ehrenfest. Pleased to meet you as well."

Taking the seat beside Philine was a boy from Berschmann the Fourteenth. I had seen him before during my practical lessons, so he was most likely a mednoble. I made sure to introduce myself as well, not wanting him to make any unreasonable demands of a laynoble like Philine.

"I am Roderick of Ehrenfest. Pleased to meet you."

The student beside Anselm, as well as the next student after that, were shooting us glances. The closer one then poked Anselm and asked him something—or perhaps urged him to gather some intelligence from us.

Younger students were told time and time again by their seniors to never be rude to the duchies ranked above them. Of course, these older students were used to operating within the bounds of the duchy rankings, but this was a tense time for first-years, who had not yet begun socializing. My circumstances made me an easy fall guy—someone Ehrenfest could dispose of without hesitation—so I was often thrust to the forefront of social situations. I could empathize with Anselm's situation as a result, so I decided to break the ice.

"Then again, as we already share practical lessons, Lord Anselm, this hardly feels like a first meeting at all."

Anselm and Philine relaxed at my response; they had both been uncertain about how to respond to this situation. "Indeed," Anselm said. "Erm, if you don't mind my asking... Since all of your duchy's first-years passed their exams on the first day, how have they been spending the time they would have spent in class?"

"Excuse me...?" I asked and exchanged a look with Philine. We couldn't understand what he was trying to say.

Anselm hastily elaborated. "Other duchies are still attending classes, so they can't socialize, right? And as first-years, they can't yet brew or train. So, I was curious to know what your duchy's first-years are doing right now, as nothing comes to mind. Is it fun to have more free time?"

Now that he mentioned it, there certainly was little we could do in the dormitory. I really had no idea how to answer him; we had all been told to keep matters related to the Better Grades Committee a secret from other duchies.

"We study, I suppose..." Philine answered, eyeing me for my reaction. "Even without lessons to attend, we do the work that Lady Rozemyne assigns us. As other duchies are still going to their classes, we have been told to stay in the dormitory for now unless we have very important extenuating circumstances."

I nodded; it was a fair enough response. "We have two first-year archduke candidates, but their older retainers haven't finished their lessons yet. We've thus been told not to leave our dormitory during classes unless we are with one of said candidates."

In truth, Lady Rozemyne was going to the library every day—and so was I, for that matter. My statement to Anselm wasn't entirely untrue, though, because Wilfried was still waiting for his retainers to finish and was therefore unable to leave the dormitory freely. To be precise, we were spending our time reading second-year study guides in the common room and making new textbooks of our own, but that was top secret.

“Ah, I see...” Anselm replied. “I suppose it’s not especially rewarding to have passed on the first day, then.”

“The truth is, in Berschmann, we’ve been instructed to ensure our grades are not below yours,” the student beside him added. “We thought we could motivate ourselves by learning what the Ehrenfest first-years do with all their free time, but it seems there is little to be excited about.”

Anselm nodded. “It certainly is hard for us lesser nobles, being wrapped up in the orders of archduke candidates.”

I didn’t quite agree. Although it was true that my heart had frozen when we first-years were ordered to pass in one go, Lady Rozemyne had prepared all the resources and strategies necessary to make it happen. After all that, plus how much I had learned from watching the archducal musician play harspiel, I was more thankful for archduke candidates than anything.

“Lady Rozemyne does not...” Philine began, looking a bit annoyed at the Berschmann students. I understood not wanting to hear one’s lord or lady be criticized, no matter how indirectly, but she was speaking to a mednoble. As someone of a lower status, it was better for her to say nothing at all.

I gave Philine a gentle prod on the arm and turned to Anselm. “Keeping up really can be a struggle, but there is much to gain from doing crest-certified work. Isn’t that right, Philine?”

“Wha? Oh, of course. If we transcribe books not currently available in our castle’s library, Lady Rozemyne graciously buys them from us. Those from other duchies interested in Ehrenfest’s crest-certified work may ask for details and participate as well.”

“Crest-certified work” in the Royal Academy referred to the jobs students could take on to earn money, and it was named as such after the order forms used to ensure payment was received. These forms would contain our names, crests, and a description of the job in question. Anyone who didn’t receive the agreed compensation could petition the aub about it during the Interduchy Tournament.

All of the students left in class were nobles who couldn’t afford to spend much on their studies, unlike archnobles and archduke candidates, so they were very open to the allure of crest-certified work. First-years in particular couldn’t make rejuvenation potions to sell to apprentice knights, nor could they risk going to their gathering spot to collect materials for apprentice scholars. A job where all one needed to do was write was very appealing indeed.

“Once we’ve finished several of our classes and are afforded more free time, we will make sure to inquire,” one of the Berschmann students said. And with that, our class began.

History and geography classes were very easy to understand when we could reference Lady Rozemyne’s prepared materials and worksheets during the professor’s lecture. Her study guides were more neatly put together than anything I was capable of, and at a glance, all the more important details were clear to see.

I’m sure Lady Rozemyne’s study guides would sell more copies than any other.

Her writing was the example I strove to reach myself. During my first year in the winter playroom, I had racked my brain for a story to tell so that I could borrow some playing cards. Then, during my second year, I borrowed the newly made book containing my story and transcribed it all onto wooden boards. It was far too expensive for me to buy outright, so I had worked my hardest to copy it all down and memorize it.

And yet, even after working so closely with the text, it was only recently that I came to understand how much she had improved on my own telling of the story. Her writing was so clear and smooth, and no matter how much I tried to replicate it when writing my own stories, I always came up short. The worst part was that I didn't really know where I was messing up or what to change.

If only Lady Rozemyne and I were in the same faction... Then, I could just ask her for assistance...

I already knew that Lady Rozemyne would readily agree to help me, but her retainers and Lord Wilfried were vehemently against me going anywhere near her. I couldn't risk trying.

Written lessons ended at fourth bell, and we returned to the dormitory for lunch. Our practical lessons for mana usage would start in the afternoon, and for these, mednobles were divided into two classes: one that contained the first- to sixth-ranked duchies, and another that contained the rest. This was done because greater duchies had such large populations, but it inadvertently made it hard for those of us from the lower-ranked duchies to forge connections with the greater duchies during class.

"Today, I will excel at removing mana from feystones," Lady Katinka declared. "That much I can assure you."

"I can push mana into a feystone without issue, but pulling it back out is so much harder," Lord Elias agreed with a nod.

Lady Katinka and Lord Elias were both neutral mednobles in Ehrenfest. In the past, their houses had appeared to loyally serve Lady Veronica, but after Lady Rozemyne's baptism, they had started warming up to Leisegang nobles instead. This had lasted until Lady Rozemyne entered her long slumber, at which point they had started distancing themselves somewhat. From my perspective as someone whose father had crossed an exceedingly dangerous bridge—and caused a great deal of chaos—in an attempt to butter up his faction superiors, their houses were behaving expertly as neutral mednobles.

As I followed two steps behind them, I resolved to perfect getting mana into feystones during this lesson. That was easier said than done, though, considering that I was so short of mana. In truth, I was closer to a laynoble than an average mednoble.

The professors brought us low-quality feystones that had previously been used by the archnobles and archduke candidates, which meant there were still slight vestiges of their mana inside them. We had to overwhelm that mana with our own, but again, this was easier said than done for me.

I struggle enough trying to move my mana around at will, so...

The magic tools given to us at birth sucked out our excess mana automatically, meaning we didn't need to move it on our own. I knew what it felt like for mana to flow into the tool, and I knew that I needed to move it in the same way... but actually doing it was another matter entirely. The archnobles and archduke candidates had apparently managed it in one go during their class, but it really didn't seem that easy to me.

"Nghhh...!"

Once again, I clenched the tiny feystone and tried to pour my mana into it. Controlling the flow had become a little easier since getting my schtappe, but even then, the task before me was beyond daunting.

"Guh?!" I cried out despite myself as an explosive burst rushed through my hands. The mana I was trying to build up had scattered, and my failure brought with it a flood of exhaustion.

"Perhaps the student who used that feystone before you has especially strong mana," Lord Elias said. "Might I suggest asking Professor Hirschur for an exchange?"

"An exchange...?" I repeated, looking down at the clear feystone.

"It feels to me that some feystones are easier to use than others."

This was my third practical spent trying to dye a feystone. Each attempt had ended in failure, so they had all seemed equally impossible to me, but I really believed the issue was with my own skill. Even so, Lord Elias had gone through the trouble of giving me advice, so I decided to at least humor the idea.

"Professor Hirschur, may I exchange this feystone for another?" I asked.

"You should be able to dye *any* feystone of this size... but as this is practice rather than a test, I shall allow it. I gather that you've realized not all stones require the same amount of effort to dye," Hirschur replied and pushed a box filled with them toward me. Of course, I hadn't realized anything myself—I was only here because of someone else's advice—but at least she had provided some confirmation.

That said... I can't tell which ones are meant to be easier.

The feystones were all equally transparent. I thanked Professor Hirschur, took one at random, and then went back to my seat.

"Nghhh... Oh?"

This stone was easier to dye than the other one; it was a slow process, but I could feel my mana steadily going into it. There was some resistance, but not enough to cause my mana to burst again, so I tightened my grip and desperately continued to pour. Eventually, light started to shine through the crevices of my fingers.

"Oh my, Lord Roderick. It would appear you've succeeded," Lady Katinka said, and I opened my fingers with timid disbelief. The once-clear feystone was now dyed a yellowish orange, the color of my mana.

"I actually did it..." I muttered. "But, er, well... Unlike your feystones, there are still bits of the other person's mana floating in mine, so it's not a complete success."

"You will need more practice, but you should not disregard your achievement," Lord Elias said, praising me.

"Indeed," Lady Katinka added. "And your task is not yet over, Lord Roderick—now you must *remove* your mana."

I was glad that we could talk like this, even if only during class. Had I been of a different faction, perhaps these conversations would have been the norm for me.

Praise be to Lady Rozemyne, who formed the Better Grades Committee.

I was already familiar with the flow of mana leaving my body—even if only through my mana being sucked out on its own—but I had no experience with drawing it back into me. I stared at the feystone questioningly and rolled it around on my palm, unsure where to even begin... and before I knew it, our lesson was over. The professor would take care of any stones that still contained mana, apparently, so I put mine back in the box and exited the classroom.

After dinner, we took turns bathing. I was of a lower status than everyone else in my room, so I always went last. I could spend that time either reading boards or writing my story, and as I made my way out of the dining hall, contemplating which to choose, Philine came to speak to me.

"Lord Roderick, I will not be attending history tomorrow. It seems our schedule cannot be changed to avoid my absence."

According to Philine, Lady Rozemyne's retainers were forming a schedule based around their classes to ensure someone was always available to accompany her to the library. Philine was taking history and geography with me, but she would sometimes need to miss classes for this reason. She looked apologetic about it—but also proud to be accompanying Lady Rozemyne, which was somewhat irritating.

"That makes sense," I replied. "Your retainer work is more important, and you *have* already passed the class, so..."

My words failed me; Lord Hartmut and Lord Cornelius were more or less glaring at me as I spoke to Philine. She was just a laynoble, but her retainer coworkers still treated her so well. I was jealous beyond words. Every time I was reminded just how different our situations were, I couldn't help but get endlessly frustrated.

If only Lady Rozemyne and I were in the same faction; then, I wouldn't have these feelings in the first place.

I was getting annoyed at Philine even though she hadn't done anything wrong—which, in turn, made me annoyed at myself. As much as I didn't want to feel this way, the negative emotions that were swelling up inside me showed no signs of calming down. It didn't make sense to me either, and I was just praying that I could swallow down my envy for long enough to change my blackening heart.

How I wish taking a bath cleansed the spirit as well...

Once it was my turn to bathe, I entrusted my body to the hot water. Much to my surprise, it felt as though the dark feelings stirring inside me started to dissolve, if only a little, and the feeling of my attendant Kashmir massaging my scalp did wonders to wash away my frustration.

"Kashmir... do you know how to get people of other factions to trust you?" I asked. He was family on my mother's side and treated me well, perhaps because he was displeased about how my father acted. He was the one who had advised me to use the library when I needed an escape from the struggles of the dormitory.

"Those of other factions, you say?" Kashmir said, looking highly troubled. It certainly was a problematic question to be asked out of nowhere, so I attempted to backpedal; one didn't want to trouble one's attendants without reason.

"It doesn't matter if not. I guess if such a way existed, everyone would already be using it..."

Obviously, there were no means by which I could get Lady Rozemyne to trust me. I was feeling even more glum, having raised and then immediately dashed my own hopes, but then Kashmir hesitantly spoke.

"There may be one way..."

"Really?!"

"Please keep still; I need to wash the bubbles from your hair." His response had shocked me into sitting up, so I obediently lay back down. He exhaled as he poured some hot water over my head. "As I understand it, the highly distrustful Lady Veronica demanded that nobles carry out some particular procedure to earn her trust. I do not know the details, unfortunately, but it does exist."

It seemed that his hesitation in answering had come from how little he actually knew about the ritual, but even so—"I feel better just knowing there's a way. Thanks, Kashmir."

"No need to thank me. I merely hope that more light may one day shine on your life here in the Royal Academy, Lord Roderick."

Although I hadn't learned anything too meaningful from our conversation, Kashmir was trying his best to help me, and that alone seemed to put me at ease.

I wonder if I'll ever earn Lady Rozemyne's trust...

I decided that, upon returning to Ehrenfest, I would start looking into the procedure that Kashmir had mentioned—the one that Lady Veronica had required of all those hoping to earn her trust. I carved that resolve into my heart so that I would never forget.

Hannelore — Careless Mumbles Lead to Ditter

“Lady Hannelore.”

As I was leaving the Small Hall after my afternoon practical lessons, Cordula called out to me and walked over. She was the adult attendant I had brought with me to the Royal Academy and my head attendant back at home.

“We have a problem, milady. Let us return to the dormitory at once,” she whispered into my ear. She was wearing such a bright smile that I almost struggled to believe her, but her eyes were even sharper than usual. Even in the face of such concerning news, she was silently urging me to stay composed, so I put on the most elegant smile I could manage and nodded in response.

I wonder, do I look like a proper greater duchy archduke candidate?

Although I had the mana of a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate, my timing always left much to be desired, and my family often scolded me for not thinking or acting as was expected of my status. I wasn’t at all confident in my own abilities, and it seemed that I would never be able to act as competently as my older brother did. In fact, Professor Primevere of my court etiquette class had just told me that I lacked the dignity and intensity expected of a greater duchy’s archduke candidate, which explained why I was struggling to pass.

“Welcome back, Lady Hannelore.”

I returned to my room, thinking it was quite unusual to see the dormitory so empty. Even the retainers who usually gathered to greet me were mostly absent.

Have the upperclassmen not finished their lessons yet...?

I turned to Cordula, saw her wearing a broad smile, and immediately revised that theory. My retainers’ absence was no doubt related to the problem she had mentioned.

“So, what in the world happened...?” I asked.

Cordula’s bright smile was suddenly tinged with concern. “Lord

Lestilaut seems to have taken charge of the apprentice knights and marched them to the Ehrenfest Dormitory."

"Why in the world did he do that?!" I exclaimed, my eyes wide in disbelief. "He gave no indication of doing any such thing this morning!"

"He intends to have Ehrenfest surrender the large shumils that attend the library to you, milady, so that you may be their master instead. He seems to think that, as they are the heirlooms of royalty, they will do wonders to improve your image."

The fact that magic tools in the form of shumils had started assisting Professor Solange in the library had turned into a rather popular topic of conversation in the Royal Academy—as had the realization that an archduke candidate from Ehrenfest was their master. According to our dormitory supervisor Professor Rauffen, these shumils were heirlooms of royalty that had been rendered inactive after losing their masters in the post-civil war purge.

I was very fond of shumils myself, and upon hearing the rumors, I had gone straight to the library to catch a glimpse of them. Seeing them assist Professor Solange in her usual duties was nothing short of adorable, and it seemed that I wasn't the only one who thought so—there had been many other girls looking at the shumils as well. It had come as quite a relief to know that so many others shared in my fascination.

After returning to my dormitory, having had my fill of cuteness, I remembered saying to Cordula: "How adorable. If only I could be the master of such shumils myself."

"I certainly did say that," I muttered, "but I hadn't intended for anyone to hear. I was just thinking aloud."

"That would have been fine under any other circumstances," Cordula replied, "but on this one occasion, it seems your timing was outright unfortunate. Rasantark was passing by and overheard your mumbling."

Rasantark was my cousin, an archnoble, and one of my brother's retainers. He had apparently reported to my brother that I wanted to be the shumils' master.

And after I've spent so long trying not to bother anyone... I can't believe this!

I wasn't very confident in myself, and my weak-willed nature often led people to criticize my lack of grace and gravitas, but the thought of stealing mastery of the shumils from Ehrenfest's archduke candidate to remedy this had never even crossed my mind. Drawing that kind of attention to myself would only make my shortcomings as a greater duchy archduke candidate that much more apparent.

“This must be a dreadful fright for Ehrenfest...” I said. “I cannot simply remain here. I must go and stop my brother!”

“An ordonnanz arrived earlier from Prince Anastasius, summoning Professor Rauffen,” Cordula noted, raising a hand to stop me. “This is no longer a matter you can resolve, milady.”

I put my head in my hands without a second thought, bemoaning how long it had taken me to finish my classes. Had I passed during my previous lesson rather than today, I might have been around to prevent all this.

“Once again, Lady Hannelore, it was nothing more than a matter of unfortunate timing.”

“Cordula, that does not make me feel any better. Everything is still my fault.”

I tried to think of something I could do, but Prince Anastasius had already summoned our dormitory supervisor; rushing over and acting overly pushy wouldn’t change anything. Instead, I had no choice but to wait for everyone to return... and when they eventually did, it was almost dinnertime. I caught my brother as soon as he appeared and demanded that he tell me what had happened, but he merely waved me away while saying we could talk over dinner.

Trying to control the nervous fluttering in my chest, I made my way to the dining hall table with the others. “Lestilaut, this all happened because Rasantark told you something he shouldn’t have, didn’t it?” I asked, fixing my brother with the hardest glare I could manage.

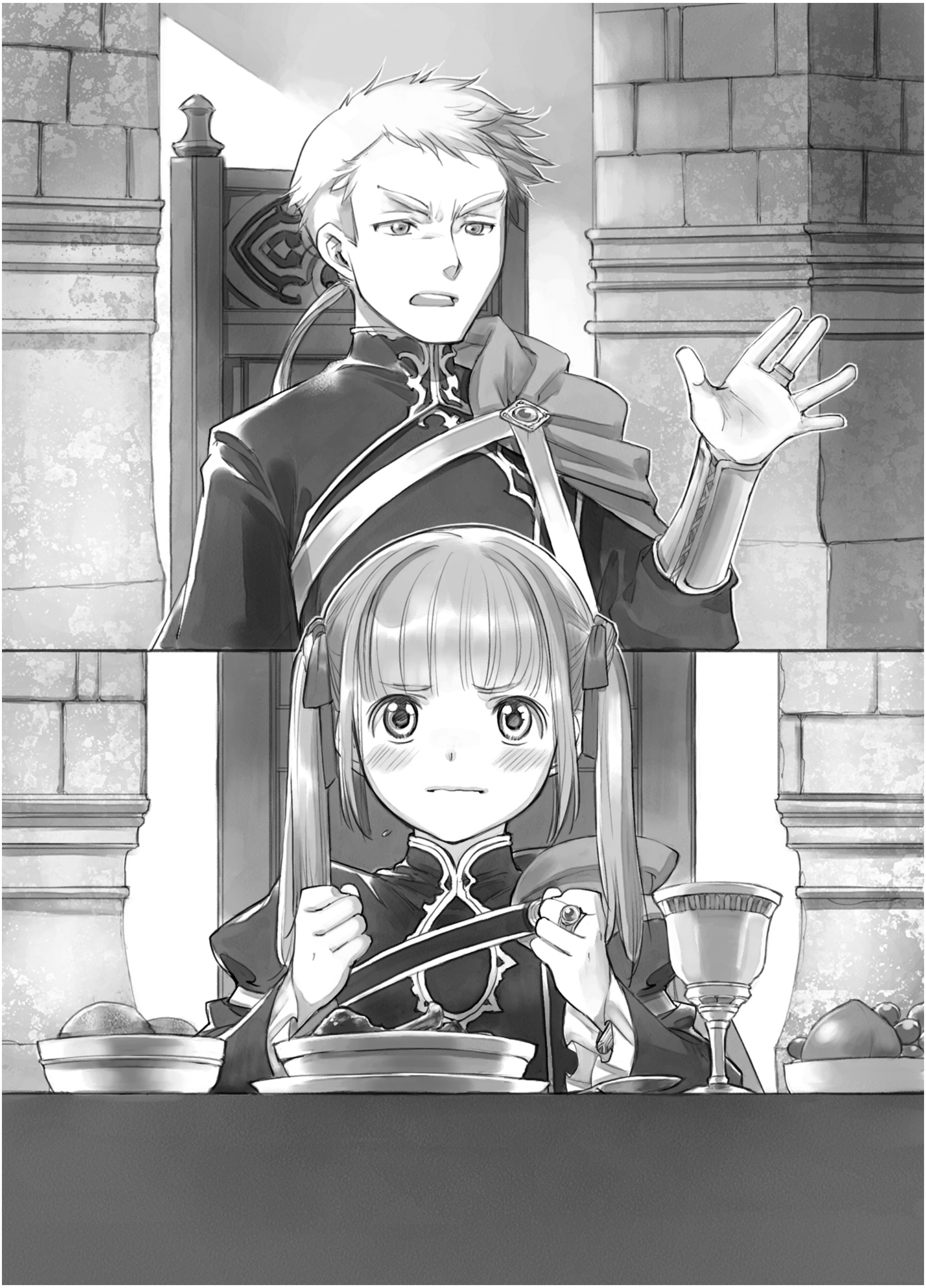
“My apologies, Lady Hannelore,” Rasantark interjected at once. “My intentions were pure, I can assure you. I simply thought you would appreciate getting what you desired most.”

Rasantark was an apprentice knight and straightforward to a fault. We had known each other since we were little, so I couldn’t doubt the good nature of his actions. He had quite genuinely wanted to realize my wish.

“That may be so, but I do not wish to take that which does not belong to us, nor am I pleased about causing a fuss like this. Even if your heart was in the right place, how can you justify stealing from another?”

“We were not attempting to steal anything—rather, we were trying to retrieve heirlooms of royalty.” As much as Rasantark tried to excuse their actions, though, it didn’t change that we would have been taking something from Ehrenfest.

“Enough,” Lestilaut said, waving a hand with a thoroughly displeased expression. “The matter has already been settled.” He clearly didn’t want to have this conversation, but I was still none the wiser about what had taken place.



"You are the one who said we would discuss this over dinner, Brother. Now, what in the world happened with Ehrenfest?"

"Irritatingly enough, they refused to give mastery of the shumils to Dunkelfelger," he replied. A large-scale battle had apparently been on the verge of forming before the prince arrived and put a stop to things. Both of our dormitory supervisors were called, and at Professor Rauffen's suggestion, a game of ditter had been played to determine who got ownership of the shumils.

It's nice to see Professor Rauffen's love of ditter actually do some good...

In the end, Ehrenfest had prevailed despite our ditter winning streak, and it was decided that Lady Rozemyne would continue to have mastery over the shumils. I truly was relieved to know we hadn't ended up stealing those rights from Ehrenfest.

"It truly is repugnant that such a coward could declare herself a saint..." Lestilaut said, eating with a frustrated expression. Apparently, he had ended up losing quite spectacularly after Lady Rozemyne forced him into participating himself. Interestingly enough, he seemed to be the only one taking the defeat so poorly—Professor Rauffen and the apprentice knights were all beyond themselves with excitement, and rather than criticizing Ehrenfest, they were actually praising Lady Rozemyne.

"Lady Rozemyne is by no means a coward, Lord Lestilaut," Professor Rauffen said gleefully. "In treasure-stealing ditter, one must use all methods available to wrench victory from one's opponents. At the end of the day, she utilized a cute little surprise attack that was full of openings—a far cry from the devious plots that Ferdinand used to employ."

From there, Professor Rauffen spoke at length about the ditter match, regaled us with stories about the genius schemer Lord Ferdinand who had managed to best Dunkelfelger in the past, and started working on a new training regimen that would take effect from tomorrow onward. The apprentice knights spent this time discussing the various strategies Lord Ferdinand had utilized in bygone days, told to them by the older knights or their parents. They resolved to win against Lady Rozemyne no matter what she attempted the next time they fought, and it seemed they were even more unified than usual.

“We must train and challenge Ehrenfest to a rematch at once.”

“Erm, Professor Rauffen... Please do not bother Ehrenfest any more than we have already.”

“Bother them? Not at all, Lady Hannelore. We’re asking them to play ditter!”

According to Professor Rauffen, ditter was something to be desired and celebrated, but it was hard to imagine most female archduke candidates welcoming such challenges.

I must be firm from here on out so that I can stop both my brother and our dormitory supervisor from causing a mess next time...

It was with that resolve in my heart that I finished my meal and exited the dining hall. I could hear the apprentice knights and those who had watched the ditter match having a rousing discussion about the game as I went.

In any case, it’s clear that Lady Rozemyne is a very competent archduke candidate... unlike me.

Lady Rozemyne had passed all of her classes on the first day, defeated Dunkelfelger in a game of ditter, and received the prince’s approval to serve as master of the royal heirlooms. She was presumably the object of more attention than any other archduke candidate right now.

Before we had come to the Royal Academy, there had been rumors that Lady Rozemyne might need to delay her studies by a year—she had apparently been poisoned during an ambush and needed to spend two years in a jureve. She hadn’t grown as much as the rest of us as a result, which should have put her at a disadvantage, but this didn’t seem to be the case at all. In fact, her youthful appearance, like that of a child who had just been baptized, made her seem all the more impressive.

Lady Rozemyne had the most beautiful and refined features despite her young age, golden eyes that shone like the moon, and shockingly glossy hair the color of the night sky. On top of all that, she also wore hairpins that were unlike any I had seen before. Even the other Dunkelfelger girls were desperate to know more, and their silent but intense pleading for me to finish my classes so that we could start socializing with her was impossible to ignore.

I must meet Lady Rozemyne in person and invite her to a tea party... but before that, I must apologize for my brother’s transgressions. This incident has no doubt caused her great offense, so I will need to take care with how I approach her.

It was far from elegant to unearth buried drama, but my mumbling had caused a great deal of trouble for Ehrenfest. I wouldn't be able to rest easy until she heard my apology.

That said... How can I go about meeting Lady Rozemyne, exactly?

Under normal circumstances, I could have simply spoken to her during class, since we were both first-years, but she had already managed to pass every single lesson. It was as though my chances to meet with her had already slipped through my fingers.

And the only class I ever see Lord Wilfried attend is the schtappe one. Ehrenfest is ranked thirteenth, but their archduke candidates are simply too skilled.

Luckily, our schtappe class was tomorrow, so I would be able to speak with Lord Wilfried then. I would need to probe him for information on when I might be able to meet with Lady Rozemyne.

Rauffen — Wondrous Ditter

Ditter is the means by which a person can win what they need and defend what they treasure. Lord Lestilaut and Lady Rozemyne had just guided the apprentice knights of their duchies in battle. The prize? Mastery over magic tools. The game? Treasure-stealing ditter. The rules were a bit unusual, but it was the first time this game had been played in the Royal Academy for... I don't know how many years. In each team's territory was its archduke candidate, and they had to win through skill and knowledge; the very sight made my heart race with excitement. And it seemed the students had felt the same way—even those who had only spectated.

"I never even considered that we might lose..." one apprentice knight said. "I mean, we were only up against Ehrenfest."

"Our knights have so much more training under their belts, but Lady Rozemyne's scheming flipped it all upside down," another agreed. "It was enough to make my breath catch in my throat. To think someone who looks so innocent has such a devilish mind..."

"We're used to speed ditter, but with this? We had no idea what was going to happen. That actually made things a lot more exciting."

"Yeah. I've never been this excited about a ditter match before. It was completely different from the normal version."

Some students seemed genuinely excited about the match, despite the fact their duchy had just lost, while others appeared to disagree with the results. One thing in particular had caught my attention, though—the way they compared treasure-stealing ditter to what they were used to.

Huh... I guess speed ditter is considered the norm now.

In the past, when someone mentioned ditter, they were always referring to the treasure-stealing version. But after the civil war, treasure-stealing ditter had become harder to play, and the Academy had ended up with no choice but to switch. It seemed that so many years had passed since then that students were now more accustomed to speed ditter—which wasn't at all good in the long term.

"If we'd played normal ditter, we would have won," one student said.

A second student nodded in agreement and then turned to me. "Professor Rauffen, isn't it against the rules to ambush us while we're bringing the treasure back? In speed ditter, that's like hiding behind us while the professor summons the feybeast and then attacking us the moment it appears." Some were evidently so focused on what they were used to that they were convinced Ehrenfest had cheated.

I chuckled and shook my head. "Speed ditter only begins when the professor sends out the feybeast—you're right in that regard—but treasure-stealing ditter starts the moment you start hunting the treasure. In other words, the match had already begun. They didn't cheat at all."

A number of students didn't seem satisfied with my answer. I snorted; by having such a soft mindset, they were pretty much asking for one of the knights who had played treasure-stealing ditter back at the Interduchy Tournament to give them a good scolding.

"You know how the ditter played at the Interduchy Tournament changed from treasure-stealing ditter to speed ditter due to population problems, right?" I said. "Before then, there were even crueler tacticians—men who constantly ambushed the apprentice knights as they looked for treasure, continued malicious attacks and tricks on other duchies until the very moment their duchy lost, and threw the Interduchy Tournament into chaos without fail."

"Are you talking about the Lord of Evil? The man who focused not on making his duchy win, but on causing chaos and ensuring that the expected winner lost...?"

"That's right. Do you know the details?" I asked, recalling that the topic had come up among the first-years during class. It had been when Hirschur described Lady Rozemyne as the man's disciple, from what I remembered.

"My uncle told me about him," a student said. "He won against half of the other duchies by traveling around in a party of two or three knights and crushing groups of maybe five or six that went out for treasure. He also used cruel magic tools that brought his opponents within an inch of their lives, and destroyed or even stole rejuvenation potions from others, refusing to return them unless they dropped out of the game... But surely not all of the stories could be true, could they?"

I grinned to myself, realizing that the Lord of Evil had become something of an old wives' tale to the older knights. The best part was that all of the stories were in fact true.

After all, the more accurate the stories get, the more you should be agonizing over how merciless he was to his enemies.

"And that Lord of Evil just so happens to be Lady Rozemyne's guardian: Lord Ferdinand," I said. "According to Ehrenfest's dormitory supervisor, they're like teacher and student."

"Wha...?"

Back then, the bulk of one's socializing time had been spent preparing for treasure-stealing ditter. The weak lesser duchies would gather intel and figure out which greater duchy to form a united front with, while greater duchies put their all into figuring out each other's plans. It had essentially been tradition for lesser and middle duchies to serve under greater duchies in a free-for-all battle of glorious scale.

Of course, through the use of devious trickery, this tradition had been turned on its head—and by none other than Lord Ferdinand, who had at the time been an archduke candidate from Ehrenfest. He would attack a greater duchy squad as it left to secure feybeasts as treasure, inform the middle duchies serving them of his success to seduce them into launching a betrayal, and then subsequently smash the greater duchy to bits while annihilating the lesser duchies sent scattering from the fallout.

That wasn't to say that his plots always resulted in a victory for Ehrenfest—in fact, he was often so focused on attacking other duchies that he devoted few troops and very little attention to protecting his own treasure, meaning his duchy never won. Even so, his influence on ditter couldn't be overstated.

In retaliation, the apprentice scholars had desperately started to research new magic tools to guard against their opponents' surprise attacks and reinforce their own. It was hard to believe now, but many exceedingly violent magic tools had been invented for and revealed during treasure-stealing games at the Interduchy Tournament, whereupon duchies would purchase them later for feybeast hunting at home.

Incidentally, Lord Ferdinand had been an exceptionally skilled apprentice scholar himself, as well as Hirschur's disciple. He had made new magic tools each year for his ambushes, and the others he produced were always in very high demand. His presence meant that even the apprentice attendants had needed to remain alert at all times to gather intelligence and secure supply lines, and the customers at the Interduchy Tournament were more lively and numerous due to the excitement of the winning duchy changing each year.

"Compared to his intricate plots and the way he threw all the other duchies into bloody chaos without a moment's hesitation or mercy, Lady Rozemyne's little surprise attacks were nothing more than child's play."

"You call them child's play, but Lady Rozemyne's strategies were positively magnificent!" Clarissa protested, almost champing her teeth as she argued. She was a well-known scholar of the sword—it was a Dunkelfelger trademark to have scholars prioritize combat over books—and was shaking her head in such passionate disagreement that her scorched-brown braid swung from side to side. "After failing the knight exam for being too short and weak, seeing such a tiny girl make a fool out of our apprentice knights has absolutely inspired me."

The vast majority of our duchy's students wanted to be knights, but we couldn't let them all take the knight course—we needed attendants and scholars too. Thus, there was a selection exam held from one's baptism to the day they entered the Royal Academy. Those who failed but still trained as much as any knight were called scholars or attendants of the sword. They had wanted to become knights more than anything, and in a way, they were more attached to ditter than the apprentice knights themselves.

"Who else would think to guard their treasure inside their highbeast?" Clarissa continued, her Dunkelfelger-blue eyes burning with passion as she clenched her fists and continued singing Lady Rozemyne's praises. "I mean, how many knights have more mana than an archduke candidate, really? Basically none!"

"I thought it was a very interesting idea myself. That can't be the only thing that caught your attention, though. What else did you notice?" I said, urging her to continue. I wanted to know more about what the observing apprentice scholars had thought of the match.

"The guts she had to participate in a sudden unplanned game of treasure-stealing ditter makes her fit to be a general—fit to lead countless knights! Putting aside their pros and cons, the fact that she came up with plots that could actually be used in battle—and at such short notice—shows just what a quick thinker she is. There's no doubt that Lady Rozemyne's intellect is her greatest weapon!"

So she's got guts, and *she's a quick thinker, huh?* It seemed that while some apprentice knights were exhibiting enough grace to praise their enemy after losing and others were trying to figure out what they themselves lacked, Clarissa was focusing on something else entirely.

"I'm told you suggested the game of ditter out of the blue, Professor Rauffen," she continued. "That means the match happened without warning. You say that tactician of the past was great, but Lady Rozemyne didn't even have the chance to prepare magic tools like he did. And even then, she was able to form such a complex strategy before the game began, using only the magic tools she had at hand. I just... I just can't...!"

Her eyes were now burning so passionately that even I found it a little off-putting—but many of the other students were agreeing with her. I coolly acknowledged the fires burning in their hearts and chewed over what Clarissa had said.

It certainly isn't easy to make a scheme in a short amount of time and with such limited tools...

In the past, spats before the Interduchy Tournament hadn't been all that unusual, and Lord Ferdinand had attended the Royal Academy during the midst of the civil war, when a fight always seemed to be lurking around the corner. Back then, everyone had carried weapons and secret magic tools to use in emergencies.

After the war, however, the entire country had been greatly weakened. Duchies had stopped fighting among themselves, although not really by choice—they simply lacked the strength and resources to continue. Life in the Royal Academy had become a lot less dangerous as a result, so students didn't walk around with that many magic tools anymore.

"For the past few years, not even apprentice knights have had experience playing treasure-stealing ditter or making schemes," I muttered, "and yet she managed to come up with several using nothing more than her highbeast and the tools she had with her. How did she manage that, I wonder? Are those really skills that can be taught? Maybe she's just a ditter prodigy."

"Of course she is!" Clarissa exclaimed, her nose flaring. "She's the Saint of Ehrenfest, you know! She looks that young because she spent two whole years in a jureve, which means she's two years behind in her education too! She couldn't have learned anything while she was asleep!"

Clarissa was right, and that realization left me blinking in surprise. Back when Aub Ehrenfest had requested for Lady Rozemyne to attend with special arrangements, we professors had simply hoped that she wouldn't fail and need to drop out immediately. Of course, she had then massively exceeded our expectations by passing all of her classes on the first day—a feat so blindingly brilliant that we hadn't actually stopped to consider the deeper implications.

"Lady Clarissa, are you suggesting that Lady Rozemyne has been honing her talent for warfare since birth?" I asked.

"I was suspicious about it up until now, but one of her retainers said that she was adopted by Ehrenfest's archduke due to having an abundance of mana. She was the daughter of their knight commander, so perhaps she was trained in battle from a young age."

"And if the Lord of Evil took her as his disciple, maybe he's trained her in ditter."

The students grew excited as they came up with theories to explain how Lady Rozemyne had come to be so talented. Of course, Clarissa was the most impassioned among them.

"If she were a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate, I would swear loyalty to her right here and now!" she declared. It reminded me of the apprentice knights of my day, who had stomped their feet with frustration that Lord Ferdinand hadn't been born in Dunkelfelger.

"Why not just win the heart of one of her retainers?" I suggested, holding back the urge to laugh at such fond memories.

"How would that work? I don't want to marry into Ehrenfest; I want to serve Lady Rozemyne. And no one who's ever married into Dunkelfelger has gone on to serve a member of the archducal family, have they?"

"It's not common, no, but you might be able to negotiate your way into accompanying her to the Archduke Conference. It's not entirely unheard of—although I think you need some time to cool your head first. You're getting too worked up about all this," I said and then turned to the students who were still eagerly theorizing about Lady Rozemyne's education. "And that goes for you lot too. There's no point doing all this speculation. I mean, why do you think apprentice scholars exist? Why do attendants hold tea parties? Your delusions are worthless, especially when the truth is within our reach."

Everyone shut their mouths at my criticism, but the fires were still raging in their eyes. I couldn't let those flames die out; with some expert guidance, the students would all grow in their areas of interest.

"Aub Ehrenfest withdrew his request for Lady Rozemyne to be given a special environment at the end of autumn, and since then, she has won in ditter, attained first-in-class status, and started spreading several new trends. These are the facts we know. Professor Pauline told me that Lady Rozemyne also met Prince Anastasius at one of her tea parties, so we can assume that her personal influence is going to rise even faster from next year onward. Now, this is just a theory—and a theory is nothing but a delusion without evidence to back it up. Starting tomorrow, you lot need to start gathering intelligence on Lady Rozemyne. That way, all these excited speculations of yours can be based on concrete facts."

"Yes, sir!" the apprentice scholars of the sword shouted in response, while the apprentice attendants began planning to hold tea parties with Ehrenfest.

"We shouldn't have any trouble inviting Lady Rozemyne to a tea party," one apprentice attendant noted, "since Ehrenfest is a neutral duchy and she's an archduke candidate the same age as Lady Hannelore. What if we help her spread trends in return for her telling us things?"

"Inviting her to tea parties wouldn't be unnatural," an apprentice scholar replied. "Lady Rozemyne and Lady Hannelore should already be socializing at least a little, since they're in the same classes. We also know that Lady Hannelore has been concerned about us bothering Ehrenfest before, so we could frame this meeting as a good way for her to apologize. She would almost certainly be behind the idea then."

There was a palpable sense of anticipation in the air, and the apprentice scholars and attendants seemed to speak with a sense of urgency that had long been missing. It was great.

"You apprentice knights need more practice playing treasure-stealing ditter," I said. "Make sure Dunkelfelger doesn't lose another game!"

The apprentice knights roared in response. I would increase their training regimen from tomorrow onward, using a rematch with Ehrenfest as encouragement, and start going through treasure-stealing ditter strategies with them. I also intended to use this opportunity to probe the Royal Academy about having the knight course shift away from speed ditter and back to the treasure-stealing kind.

I'll ask the other professors about it tomorrow.

We dormitory supervisors headed out right after breakfast to start preparing for our classes. It was as I made my way to the knight building that I saw a familiar woman walking ahead of me—Fraularm, the dormitory supervisor of Ahrensbach. She spoke in a shrill voice and tended to rant for what seemed like an eternity once she got going. I slowed down, hoping to avoid the tedium that came with getting ensnared in her web. My efforts were in vain, however, as she soon turned around and spotted me.

"Oh my. Good morning, Rauffen," she said. "I was informed that Dunkelfelger lost to Ehrenfest in ditter the other day. Is that true, I wonder?" she asked, smirking as if extremely pleased about our defeat. She wouldn't be the only one, I wagered.

Maybe I should tell the apprentice knights not to fall for taunts and get wrapped up in fights. Or maybe I should do the opposite and advise them to start more *fights... That way, both duchies involved would get more experience with treasure-stealing ditter.*

"The first-year archduke candidate Lady Rozemyne displayed incredible leadership skills," I replied. "We are grateful that she identified our weak points, and the apprentice knights are—"

"My, my, my! Lady Rozemyne took charge, you say? But that position of authority should belong to a man—to Lord Wilfried, no less!" Fraularm exclaimed with an exaggerated look of shock. Her overcritical tone reminded me of the rumor that she had been attacked by Lady Rozemyne's highbeast. In other words, saying anything complimentary about the young Ehrenfest student didn't seem very wise.

Sensing my mistake, I noted that Lord Wilfried had been absent and swiftly changed the subject. "As I feared, the change in curriculum following the civil war is finally starting to show its cracks."

"Just what do you mean by that? Are you saying the new professors and courses are inadequate?" Fraularm demanded, grimacing with clear displeasure. Only then did I remember that she herself had been hired after the civil war. It seemed that I had touched a nerve.

She's such an annoying person to talk to.

"In the knight course," I clarified at once. "I feel that playing speed ditter in the Interduchy Tournament is encouraging students to focus so much on attack power that they forget to hone any other skills. They're getting too comfortable, and there is much they should learn that they have not. I think it would be best if we returned to—"

"My, my! Too comfortable, you say?!" Fraularm exclaimed, interrupting me again. I put up my guard, unsure what had spurred her wrath this time, but instead of saying anything more, she just started mumbling to herself.

Hm? Has she just figured out something to do with her research?

Professors of the scholar course tended to be at least partially focused on their research at all times, so whenever something came up that seemed even the slightest bit useful, they would abandon everything to pursue it. I spent a lot of time with all sorts of professors in the Royal Academy, so unfortunately for me, I was used to this kind of peculiar behavior.

I could probably go on ahead to class now...

It would be simple to pass by her, but if you broke the focus of a scholar professor deep in thought, they tended to get up in your face and complain about it for days. You had to be careful.

I tried sneaking away, but Fraularm suddenly clapped her hands together. "Rauffen, I agree with you entirely—we professors must rethink many things to prevent our students from becoming *too comfortable*. I thank you ever so much for your exceedingly wise insight."

And with that, she walked off, seemingly in a very good mood all of a sudden. I didn't have a clue what kind of thoughts had been running through her head, but I was glad she was gone. I patted my chest with relief and headed on to the knight dormitory.

Those stubborn idiots!

I had spoken to the other professors on the knight course about our ditter game against Ehrenfest, how apprentice knights were growing increasingly incompetent, and the dangers that came from them not knowing a thing about treasure-stealing ditter. My points had been pretty solid, but they had just said, “Treasure-stealing ditter puts too much of a burden on lesser duchies. Why do you think we changed the coursework in the first place?”

In other words, the stubborn professors had shot down my idea without a second thought.

If the students can’t do proper knight work at the Royal Academy, why do the professors think they’ll be able to do it once they go back to their home duchies?!

A portion of the funding for Royal Academy classes came from the Sovereignty, while the rest came from individual duchies. Naturally, greater duchies provided the most, while lesser duchies provided only a small amount. And yet, the students all received the same education. How did these professors not realize that treasure-stealing ditter was best for those from lesser duchies who wouldn’t be able to play it at home? Playing here was the best way for them to get experience.

Still, dwelling on the matter wouldn’t change the fact that they had refused. It was better to focus on the things I could make happen on my own. If changing the Royal Academy’s policies was too ambitious, I just needed to start within my own sphere of influence.

Guess I’ll just have to make sure Dunkelfelger gets trained properly, at least...

The apprentice knights were already excited about improving in treasure-stealing ditter, and I didn’t want to waste this opportunity. Thankfully, the Dunkelfelger Dormitory had its own training grounds. We could easily train there.

Once my classes for the day were over, I returned to the dormitory and gathered the apprentice knights just outside the training grounds. I instructed them to split into two teams and practice playing treasure-stealing ditter, but no sooner had they started than an ordonnanz shot past me. I furrowed my brow, wondering who had sent it and whom they had sent it to.

One of my questions didn’t remain unanswered for long—Lord Lestilaut entered with his retainers and looked over the two groups of apprentice knights. “Rauffen, stop this foolishness and have them train in speed ditter," he said. "Ranking highly in the Interduchy Tournament is clearly more important than this. We must defeat Ehrenfest. Is that understood?"

He was speaking with the arrogant attitude he so consistently adopted, but that wasn't good at all. The knights learning to coordinate, think, and properly grow strong was infinitely more important than the Interduchy Tournament rankings.

"I have to strongly disagree," I called as he turned and made his way to leave. "Treasure-stealing ditter and speed ditter are entirely different. Both require unique skill sets. Why would you say that treasure-stealing ditter practice is irrelevant?"

"Hmph. Treasure-stealing ditter is out of date. It will never be popular now."

Despite the ditter game back then having been incredible enough to open the eyes of the apprentice knights, it seemed that the heart of our archduke candidate remained unmoved. Lord Lestilaut was uncooperative, and since Lady Hannelore hadn't seen the match, all she had to contribute to the matter was asking me to please stop bothering Ehrenfest.

How am I supposed to feel good about the future when our very own archduke candidates are acting like this?

I wanted Lord Lestilaut to learn from Lady Rozemyne, who carefully analyzed her allies' faults and her enemies' strengths, such that she could praise her foes even after emerging victorious. At this rate, our students were going to get so drunk on our tournament win streak that we'd end up losing all over again. It was only a matter of time before we came tumbling down.

"Ditter is not meant to be practice for slaying feybeasts," I argued. "It is training for a battle in which one expends all they have to obtain what they want or protect what they hold dear. Having offensive strength does not immediately guarantee one's victory. Do you not understand this?"

Lord Lestilaut grimaced, making no attempt to hide his displeasure. It was a silent order for me to hold my tongue, but I continued nonetheless. He needed to understand this. He needed to face his defeat head-on and learn from it, not just for his own sake but for the sake of Dunkelfelger's future.

"I suggested treasure-stealing ditter back then because I wanted to see how Ehrenfest would respond," I revealed.

"What do you mean?" Lord Lestilaut asked, blinking in surprise.

"Until recently, Ehrenfest has prioritized going with the flow above all else. It remained neutral during the civil war and followed any orders it received from the top-ranking duchies without fail. In this case, however, Ehrenfest showed an iron resolve to maintain its place even when Dunkelfelger, the second-ranked duchy joined up with many other duchies, ordered its compliance. You are an archduke candidate, Lord Lestilaut; did you not feel that was strange? Did you think Lady Rozemyne was being an annoying brat and nothing else?"

Presumably, Lord Lestilaut hadn't given the situation much thought. He crossed his arms and glared at me, indicating that I should continue. I could tell that he didn't like what I was saying but found it meaningful enough to be worth hearing.

"We don't know what value Ehrenfest is deriving from the library's magic tools," I explained. "Lady Rozemyne said she would rather have an archnoble librarian be their master, and that she would give them to one who frequently visited the library to supply them with mana. She also said that she would never give them to someone who couldn't care for them properly, even if that person was a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate. The more important these tools are to Ehrenfest, the more they need to be able to protect them."

"And is that why you suggested we play treasure-stealing ditter?"

"Ideally, the heirlooms of royalty would be protected by those strong enough to ensure their safety. It would be dangerous to leave them with Ehrenfest, a member of no faction, if they did not even have the strength to protect them."

Lord Lestilaut sniffed. "So, in short, you used us to test whether they were strong enough to protect those heirlooms."

"I wouldn't put it quite so harshly. As your dormitory supervisor, Lord Lestilaut, I did intend to help you. And although I did wish to see how Ehrenfest would respond, at the time, I saw no reason to believe Dunkelfelger might lose."

My taunting made Lord Lestilaut grit his teeth; indeed, nobody had expected Ehrenfest to seize victory. It was likely that even Prince Anastasius had determined it was better for Dunkelfelger to have the magic tools as members of the victorious side of the civil war than a duchy that had refrained from taking sides.

"However," I continued, "in contrast to the expectations of all, Ehrenfest won. Do you know why that is?"

"Of course. They won because they used deceitful and downright cowardly trickery rather than fighting directly and courageously. Had it not been for her evil tactics, we clearly would have won."

"Correct," I replied with a nod.

Lord Lestilaut stared at me through narrowed eyes, trying to discern my true intentions. "Were you not praising those evil tactics just moments ago?" he asked.

"She used brains to make up for her duchy's lack of brawn, pushed magic tools to their limits, and formed a plot to secure victory. In other words, she embraced the heart of treasure-stealing ditter. If you want to know why the battle ended as it did, the answer is simple: Dunkelfelger has grown too used to the ways of speed ditter, while Lady Rozemyne likely knew nothing of speed ditter and simply sought ways to secure her victory."

Of course, that hadn't been the only reason for her success; the crafty plots she had come up with one after another had been more masterful than anyone would expect from a first-year archduke candidate.

"Do you know what makes speed and treasure-stealing ditter so different, Lord Lestilaut? Do you know what they were originally intended to serve as training for?"

"Yes, of course," Lord Lestilaut replied, raising an eyebrow in apparent frustration that I would ask something so obvious. "Speed ditter was a competition to see who could most efficiently hunt the growing number of feybeasts within the duchy, was it not? Surely nothing is more important to knights than improving their ability to quickly and decisively eliminate such threats."

I nodded and then said, "However," my voice now loud enough that all the apprentice knights in the training grounds could hear, "feybeasts generally act according to their species. They do not vary from the expected, so hunting them tends to make one's fighting style uniform. That is why our modern apprentice knights have no idea what to do when unexpected events occur and our chain of command crumbles."

"And you believe that is why we lost?"

"Yes, to a considerable degree. Unlike summoned feybeasts, the enemies in treasure-stealing ditter are human beings as well. One must think hard and carefully to avoid defeat. Consider what could be done to flip the situation around, or what traps the enemy is likely to set."

It was completely different from hunting formulaic feybeasts. You had no idea what plots your enemies were coming up with or what magic tools they had. Sure, there were general strategies and rules of thumb for battle, but rarely would your opponent actually follow them.

"As your match against Ehrenfest has demonstrated," I continued, "knights don't get collectively stronger by rushing to kill summoned feybeasts in a controlled environment. As the future aub of Dunkelfelger, you should understand what makes this lack of progress so dangerous."

"Do you mean to say I should embrace the schemes of cowards simply because treasure-stealing ditter is a way of preparing for battles over the foundation of one's duchy?" Lord Lestilaut asked, glaring at me.

"I'm not saying that you need to embrace them; I just want you to know that it's pointless to complain about them after you inevitably lose."

Treasure-stealing ditter served as a way for archdukes to practice coordinating and fighting with their knights. It encouraged them to think as hard as they could about how to protect something—a skill that would prove crucial if their foundation one day became the target of another duchy. Complaining about cowardice and evil was all well and good in times of peace, but it wouldn't do anything to help reclaim stolen land. Of course, that was assuming they were even afforded time to complain; in most cases, an archducal family that lost its duchy was swiftly executed.

"Rauffen!" Lord Lestilaut shouted, suddenly red-faced. He whipped out his schtappe, causing a stir to run through the apprentice knights, but I simply whipped out my own and continued taunting him.

"Lord Lestilaut, you rebuked the apprentice knights for their defeat, but I didn't see you trying to lead your duchy as Lady Rozemyne did. Are you not ashamed? Can you really call yourself the next aub of Dunkelfelger?"

"How dare you! *Schwert*!" Lord Lestilaut morphed his schtappe into a sword and charged at me. "Do you mean to say I'm not fit to be the next archduke?!"

"Everyone, stand down! *Schwert*!" I avoided his attack, then morphed my own schtappe into a sword. Those around us let out cries of surprise and hurriedly backed away. “Did you really gain nothing from that game of ditter except petulant anger?”

He offered no response.

“If so, there’s no way I can deny that you lack the self-awareness and mindset required of a proper aub, Lord Lestilaut.”

“Silence!”

Lord Lestilaut swung at me again and again, his movements sharp. He was fairly strong—as one would expect, since he trained on a more regular basis than the archduke candidates of other duchies—but that still wasn’t enough to beat me, a professor of the knight course. He worked on honing his skills more than most, but I trained every day and night. Not to mention, he was entrusting so much to anger that he was fighting even more sloppily and predictably than he did during our usual training.

"If an archduke loses their duchy, they have nothing!" I roared. That was why apprentice knights had always trained through treasure ditter, a form of mock war. "Do you not understand this?! Knights need to train to protect their duchy!"

Had the Dunkelfelger knights simply remained calm, Lady Rozemyne's plots could have been dealt with easily. That was why they needed more training—to be able to deal even with the unexpected. It seemed that my pleas hadn't worked on Lord Lestilaut, however; with gritted teeth and a ferocious glare, he adjusted his grip on his sword.

"That's all talk of the past!" he snarled. "Yurgenschmidt doesn't have the strength required for another war! There's no point in us training for one!"

There was some truth to his words—the civil war and purge had indeed crippled the entire country, and not a single duchy had the leeway to target another's land. At the moment, even if such an attempt proved successful, the extra territory would only be an immense burden. At the very least, I could commend the fact that members of the archducal family clearly saw what a tragic situation the country was in.

"You seem so certain that the situation our country's in will continue forever," I said, "and that's precisely why you're still a kid."

"What?!"

Lord Lestilaut swung down hard, allowing me to briskly knock his weapon from his hands. His eyes locked on his blade as it spun through the air, and I used that opportunity to grab him by the cape, flip him over, and pin him to the ground.

"If you let your guard down, Lord Lestilaut, your duchy's foundation will soon belong to another."

"Ngh..."

"Events of such enormous importance—that flip the very world on its head—always happen when one lets their guard down."

Back when I was a student, nobody had expected a civil war to happen and cripple the country. At the time, the second prince had received the Grutrissheit, and everyone had assumed he would take over as king—that is, before he suddenly died right after the king he was meant to succeed. The Grutrissheit had then been lost, and the civil war had occurred.

Around ten years had passed since then, with the civil war, the purge, and so on all having led to this moment. Nobody could say that another equally great change might not happen again.

“Dunkelfelger is the Zent’s sword,” I said. “Above all else, we need the power to react to any situation at a moment’s notice.”

“Rauffen...”

“Had that game of treasure-stealing ditter been real ditter, you would have lost your troops, your duchy, and even its foundation to Ehrenfest, Lord Lestilaut.”

After helping Lord Lestilaut to his feet, I fixed him with as stern a look as I could manage. I wanted him to understand. I needed him to agree.

“If you cannot face your defeat against Lady Rozemyne and use it as fuel to improve, then when you one day become the aub, you will only repeat your mistakes,” I concluded. “You must not interfere with the training of the apprentice knights. Instead, spend your time learning to become an aub fit for Dunkelfelger.”

We stared at each other for a while, until eventually Lord Lestilaut turned to depart. “The attendants of the sword will suffice as my guards in the dormitory. Guard knights, remain here.”

“Lord Lestilaut, we—”

He cut his right hand through the air, silencing his retainers’ protests. “Rauffen, I entrust the training of my guard knights and the rest of the apprentices to you.”

“So it shall be done.”

Wilfried — An Inelegant Time at the Royal Academy

I couldn't deny the immense regret I was feeling over my actions.

But who can blame me? Rozemyne always showed a ton of motivation when baited with the library. Wouldn't anyone think about using that to ensure all the first-years passed their lessons?

That had been my thought process at the time, but in truth, it was pure greed. Rozemyne had become an even crueler teacher than Uncle—she had cut down on her sleep, provided documents analyzing everyone's weak points, and ordered everyone to pass on their first day with an uncomfortably intense smile.

I even sympathized with Roderick of the former Veronica faction, despite them being our enemies; and when I scolded Rozemyne for going too far, she just looked at me with confusion. "I mean, didn't you forbid me from going to the library specifically so that I would push everyone and make them pass as soon as possible?" she had said. "Need I repeat that I said I was putting my all into this?"

Oh no, no, no... She can't be stopped.

"Whatever shall we do, Lord Wilfried?" one of my retainers asked me. "If we do not stop Lady Rozemyne, the first-years may be traumatized."

Yes, I know that already! The problem is, I don't know how *to stop her!*

I cradled my head, desperately trying to think of a way to halt Rozemyne's rampage. I was used to her being exceedingly competent and able to instruct anyone, even nobles—traits that had made her something of a role model to me. This was my first time seeing her go this berserk, and in truth, I had no idea what to do about it.

"Lord Wilfried, Lord Cornelius is asking what we intend to do," my retainer said. "According to him, there is no way to stop Lady

Rozemyne once the library becomes involved."

"*He's* asking *me*?! I mean, he's her blood relative! If not even he knows, what chance do I have?! If only Rozemyne and I had spent more time together... Ah, that's it! Uncle!"

Uncle knew more about Rozemyne than I did, so I wrote a letter to him asking what I could do to stop her. I was sure he'd have some ideas. "Deliver this to the knight guarding the teleportation hall," I said when I was done. "Tell him it's urgent."

"Understood," my apprentice attendant Isidore said and ran off with the letter in hand.

"We have a response from Lord Ferdinand."

"Let me see it," I said, taking the board from Ignaz and reading it at once. The contents made me want to put my head in my hands even more.

No, Uncle... This isn't the answer I wanted.

"Lord Wilfried, what does it say?" my retainers asked. Their eyes were brimming with hope, and it pained me to see them still thinking there was a chance we might resolve things. I turned the board around and thrust it out so they could read for themselves.

"Do you have no apprentice scholars among your retainers? That is to say, is your retinue so incompetent that not a single one of them knows how to structure a letter properly? Teach them some sense. Or at the very least, learn to write structured letters on your own so that you may ask these questions."

"What...?"

At the end of this beautifully written letter was the actual advice—if you could even call it that.

"The library can be both medicine and a deadly poison when it comes to Rozemyne, and like medicine, you must dole it out to her in carefully measured amounts. An incompetent fool who attempts to use her interests to exploit her while not knowing how to manage her is doomed to have their efforts blow up in their face. Had the library not been involved, a book would have served as an adequate distraction, but unfortunately for you, this is not an option here. The first-years have no choice but to finish the death march you have started them on. If you need a bright side to this otherwise bleak situation, first-year written lessons are not difficult at all. They should manage."

"So he says," Ignaz remarked as he finished reading the letter, "but there is far too much content to memorize all at once."

"Uncle had Rozemyne memorize it all after spending two years asleep," I replied. "He must be basing his estimate on her instead of a normal first-year."

Despite having spent two years in a jureve, Rozemyne had easily managed to learn everything covered in the first-year course and was now teaching the other first-years. Uncle seemed to be assuming we were all capable of such an extraordinary feat, so he presumably thought that all we needed to do was assist the other students with their weak points.

"Both Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand genuinely think everyone can pass, I see..." Ignaz muttered.

"Yep. I'm... going to have to apologize to the first-years."

In the end, Rozemyne successfully hammered the coursework into the first-years, and while some had more or less been crying onto their test papers, everyone was able to pass. It was an achievement that earned us a lot of praise and attention from the other duchies, but we weren't proud; we were just exhausted and relieved it was over.

Much to our dismay, however, Rozemyne's shenanigans didn't end there. She was accused of attacking a professor with her highbeast, went missing while looking for her Divine Will, became the master of two magic tools while registering in the library, attained the highest grades in her class while simultaneously passing faster than anyone else, and started holing up in the library. She also managed to pick a fight with another duchy while measuring clothes, win a game of ditter while I almost died of anxiety in the dorm, receive a direct summons from a prince, begin socializing with an archduke candidate from a greater duchy, receive *another* summons from a prince despite venturing only to the library, and come back from her meeting with him unconscious after passing out midway through it.

For each new predicament, I was at a complete loss and sent more questions to Ehrenfest. All the classes except my schtappe class were finally over, but Uncle was correcting and returning my reports on such a regular basis that it felt as though my studies hadn't even come close to ending. Writing reports that met his standards was a lot harder than passing classes. Still, my cousins in the higher grades hadn't yet finished their lessons, so my one reassurance as I wrote reports about Rozemyne was that I wouldn't need to attend tea parties for a little while longer.

“We did it, Lord Wilfried!” Ignaz exclaimed one day, beaming as he brought me another response from Lord Ferdinand. He had apparently gotten it from the knight by the teleportation hall on his way to see me.

“Has he actually said something of use this time?!” I asked.

Rozemyne had gone to the library, only to be taken away by Prince Anastasius and pass out in a meeting that her retainers hadn’t been permitted to attend. My most recent report to Uncle had detailed all this and asked for some guidance on how to deal with the prince, and with how excited Ignaz seemed to be, the response must have been valuable. I reached out to accept it, at which point my retainer went “Ah...” and averted his gaze.

“What?”

“Erm, Lord Ferdinand did not send our report back to us with words of criticism. In his letter, he said that he was very satisfied with our writing, so, um...”

“But what about his actual answer?”

My emotions stormed as I read through the report. On the one hand, I was glad that Uncle had finally recognized my abilities, but on the other, I was conflicted because that was not the point of the reports. My eyes flitted across the text. Just as Ignaz had said, Uncle praised the structure of our letter with his usual perfect handwriting. At the very end, however, was a simple message: “As soon as Rozemyne recovers, order her to return to Ehrenfest.”

“They’re making Rozemyne return home,” I said.

“It’s a shame, isn’t it? We can finally write proper reports, but now there won’t be anything for us to report on.”

“I don’t think that’s something to be disappointed about,” I said, shaking my head at him before looking over Uncle’s response again. There was no mistake about it: Rozemyne was being ordered back to Ehrenfest.

Well, at least I’ll get some more time to myself once she’s gone.

I was sure that I could spend the time I had thus far spent writing reports on my hobbies and socializing instead. I stood up, envisioning the elegant, comfortable days ahead, eternally grateful to my father and the others for having sent this order.

It was only later that I realized my days of comfort were little more than a pipe dream. Instead, I was going to be spending my time cleaning up the messes Rozemyne had made.

Hannelore — Cursed with Such Unfortunate Timing

Crests were currently very popular in schtappe class. Lord Wilfried, an Ehrenfest archduke candidate, had introduced them, and now everyone else wanted to copy his example. They were an excellent way of making one's schtappe stand out, and envisioning one's own family crest was easy enough, considering how often one saw it. Indeed, it was a shared desire to stand out from one's classmates that had resulted in these crests spreading like wildfire.

I searched for Lord Wilfried among the students casting rott and sending out ordonnanzes; this class was my only opportunity to speak casually with an Ehrenfest archduke candidate.

"He is over there, Lady Hannelore."

One of my duchy's archnobles indicated one side of the room with a smile. I followed her gesture, and there he was, laughing among a group of other male archduke candidates as they all perfected their schtappes. It certainly didn't seem to be a circle that a female archduke candidate could intrude upon... but apparently I was the only one who thought that.

"Is something the matter, Lady Hannelore?" the same archnoble asked, having noticed that I was frozen in place. She and the girls with her were apprentice attendants, and they seemed to passionately desire a tea party with Lady Rozemyne. Their intense, prodding smiles made me feel as though my head attendant Cordula were here and criticizing my hesitance in person.

I suppose the apprentice attendants will end up like Cordula after all, once they have enough years of experience.

"Do you not wish to apologize for Lord Lestilaut's rudeness?" they probed. Indeed, I was certain that these girls would one day become excellent attendants. I inhaled deeply, trying to block out their eerily familiar smiles and gazes.

Now is not the time to be nervous; I must apologize for my brother's rudeness. There is nothing unusual about me asking how Lady

Rozemyne is doing and inviting her to a tea party.

I slowly took my first step, repeating in my head the questions and statements that my retainers had aided me in preparing. “I see you’ve made your crest more three-dimensional,” Lord Wilfried was saying to Lord Ortwin as I reluctantly made my way over.

Lord Ortwin nodded. “The divine beast on my family crest is a snake, so it doesn’t require much more mana to have it curl around the shaft like this.”

“I see. Won’t be easy to use Ehrenfest’s lion like that...”

The mere thought of interrupting their conversation filled me with dread, but I needed to take action. I worked up my courage and then said in a strained voice, “Erm, Lord Wilfried...”

“Oh, Lady Hannelore.” Lord Wilfried turned around at once, wearing a smile that was bright with the joy of one discovering a new ally. “Do you want to put a crest on your schtappe too? Dunkelfelger’s beast is an eagle, right?”

No. That’s not why I’m here...

This misunderstanding would only make it harder for me to segue into a discussion about tea parties, so I hurriedly shook my head. “The crested schtappes that you’ve created look wonderful, Lord Wilfried... but I will one day be married into another duchy, so it would not be wise for me to add my family crest to something so permanent.”

In truth, this was mostly an excuse. I didn’t have much experience with controlling my mana, and my clumsiness meant I struggled enough to maintain even a normal schtappe, let alone one with unessential decorations. Adding a crest was simply out of the question for me.

“Ah. I did not consider that problem for girls...” Lord Wilfried replied. “I want my own schtappe to be entirely unique, so I plan to keep working on it until it stands out as Lord Ortwin’s does.” He whipped out his schtappe and glared at it, his dark-green eyes making his dissatisfaction with its shape all too apparent.

I’ve simply been wishing for this class to end, but Lord Wilfried... He’s striving to improve. It’s wonderful.

Impressed, I carefully observed Lord Wilfried while awaiting my next opportunity to speak. He put his schtappe away and sighed, at which point I decided to ask about Lady Rozemyne.

“Um, Lord Wilfried...” I said. “Might I ask how Lady Rozemyne is doing right now?”

In an instant, the archduke candidates who had been making their schtappes with Lord Wilfried all stopped talking and looked at me. They must have been curious about Lady Rozemyne, who had vanished after immediately finishing her classes and was rumored to have become the master of royal heirlooms. Even the female archduke candidates were taking small steps toward us in an attempt to hear us better.

"Would it be bothersome for me to invite her to a tea party?" I asked. "I am aware that my brother was terribly rude to her, so I was hoping to host a get-together for her benefit."

Wilfried paused in thought, and a moment later, there came a whisper from nearby. "Dunkelfelger was rude to Ehrenfest...?" I turned to look without thinking and saw that the voice belonged to Lord Ortwin, an archduke candidate from Drewanchel, who now seemed to be contemplating something himself.

"This is a personal matter, Lord Ortwin—not anything to do with interduchy diplomacy," I quickly noted in an attempt to snuff out any misconceptions. "It may seem strange for me to apologize on behalf of my elder brother, but I must say, he has been getting me into trouble ever since I was born." I punctuated this statement with a long sigh, hoping to emphasize how problematic my brother really was.

Lord Ortwin gave a firm nod. "I know the feeling well; my elder sister gets me into trouble all the time. Always minor incidents, of course, but still." He was naturally referring to Lady Adolphine. She appeared calm and intellectual, but it seemed that she often dragged her little brother into undesirable situations.

I would still say he has it better, though. Lady Adolphine is a delicate woman. My brother, on the other hand, has a knack for turning small problems into large ones.

As we were sharing our struggles as younger siblings, I noticed that Lord Wilfried was looking rather pensive, no doubt because he was an older brother himself. "Oh, my apologies," I said. "I asked a question, but we ended up on a tangent about something else entirely."

"I don't mind. As an older brother, though, I must say—we get dragged into problems by our younger siblings as well. I have to report on more or less everything my little sister does."

Lord Ortwin laughed. "But what problems could Lady Rozemyne possibly have caused? She's an honor student who finished her classes faster than anyone."

"You already know the answer to that question, Lord Ortwin. There are rumors that she attacked a professor with her drivable highbeast, fell unconscious while obtaining her schtappe in the Farthest Hall, became the master of the library's magic tools... My headache never stops."

"I would feel the same. I see that in Ehrenfest, the older siblings are the ones who suffer."

A smile played on my lips. "Still, Lord Wilfried... The thought of you going through so much trouble to clean up after Lady Rozemyne is quite heartwarming. You certainly do love your sister."

My words inspired reserved chuckles and giggles from those around us. Lord Wilfried waited for them to settle, then turned to me and said, "Lady Hannelore, about your questions... Since finishing her classes, Rozemyne has been spending her days in the library. She has already attended a tea party with professors and a Klassenberg student, so your invitation would not be bothersome whatsoever. In fact, we would be honored to receive an invitation from Dunkelfelger." It was such a reassuring answer that I sighed with relief, but his expression then clouded over slightly. "That said, she is due to return to Ehrenfest for the latter half of winter, so time really is of the essence."

"I thank you ever so much," I replied. Now that I was sure she wouldn't mind, I simply needed to go to the library, meet Lady Rozemyne in person, and invite her to a tea party. My attendants would contact her retainers and manage the rest. I said, "I do wish you luck with crafting a wondrous schtappe," then returned to where the other blue-capes from my duchy were gathered.

The apprentice attendants eagerly approached me. For some reason, the apprentice knights had also come over to watch while practicing with their schtappes. Among them was Rasantark—my cousin, and the person who had spurred my brother to action with his unnecessary remarks. "Lady Hannelore," he said, sounding hesitant. "Did you receive a positive response from Ehrenfest?"

"Yes. Lord Wilfried said we may invite Lady Rozemyne to a tea party. She seems to be visiting the library on a daily basis, so I plan to go there myself and meet with her in person." My response must have put Rasantark at considerable ease, as his entire body seemed to relax.

The apprentice attendants gave bright smiles. “We certainly aren’t able to speak to archduke candidates from other duchies ourselves,” they said. “Lady Hannelore, the matter is in your hands.” And with that, they started off elsewhere, chattering to the tune of: “I should like to ask Lady Rozemyne how she came up with those plots.” “Shall we question her about her hairpins?” “I am more interested in how she keeps her hair so glossy.” It seemed their heads were already filled with plans for the tea party.

“My sincerest apologies, Lady Hannelore,” Rasantark said. “I have caused such a mess.”

“It is fine, Rasantark. I am used to cleaning up after my brother... This is only so troublesome because it is my first time dealing with a mess where those of other duchies are involved.”

Lestilaut causing me problems was nothing new—whenever he would create some issue, our mother would scold us both, for some reason. By now, I was quite used to racing around, cleaning up after him.

Not that I ever want to...

Hoping to apologize to Lady Rozemyne before she returned to Ehrenfest, I had found an opportunity to visit the library. Several days had passed since Lord Wilfried gave me his advice, but that was because I had so little free time to work with. Lady Rozemyne no longer needed to attend classes, but there were many I had yet to pass.

I gazed around the library and then exhaled in defeat. Much to my disappointment, Lady Rozemyne was nowhere to be seen.

“We have just learned from an apprentice scholar that she was invited to a tea party by Lady Eglantine of Klassenberg earlier today,” Cordula explained.

It seems my timing was very unlucky...

Although it was unfortunate, there was no helping it now. Knowing the tea party schedules of other duchies was far from easy, so I would simply have to wait for my next opportunity.

“Cordula, when do I next have time to visit the library?”

“Three days from now,” my head attendant replied. “You would have more opportunities if you finished your lessons quickly as well.”

My written lessons were one thing, but I was still struggling with my practical ones. Drivable highbeasts seemed so convenient, and my hope was to have mine look like a shumil, but actually making one was proving much harder than expected.

Three days later, when I was once again afforded some free time, I made my way to the library. No sooner had I arrived, however, than my shoulders slumped in discouragement. Lady Rozemyne was indeed present, but Prince Anastasius was taking her somewhere.

Nooo... Once again, I've failed to apologize. I can only pray that Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time will one day grant me her blessing.

Lady Rozemyne didn't look particularly well and was lagging farther and farther behind Prince Anastasius as they walked. One could easily deduce that her summons hadn't been expected or desired, which was a terrifying thought. The very idea of going through such an encounter with royalty was enough to put me on edge.

I returned to the library the next day, but Lady Rozemyne was nowhere to be seen. I asked my apprentice scholars to look into the matter, and as it turned out, she had fallen ill again.

"Lady Hannelore, perhaps you should give up on meeting with Lady Rozemyne in person and send the invitation to her instead," Cordula suggested. "Your timing is simply too unfortunate."

My classes had given me a chance to spend time with and slowly get to know the other archduke candidates, but not once had I spoken to Lady Rozemyne directly. We might as well have been strangers, and to make matters worse, despite the absence of any kind of relationship between us, I had still managed to cause problems for her. I wanted to speak to her at least once in person before sending my invitation, as was the proper thing to do, but at this rate, she would return to Ehrenfest before I could apologize to her.

"Cordula... Please send the invitation to Ehrenfest," I said. "Address it to the duchy's archduke candidates in general, as I do not know Lady Rozemyne personally."

"Understood."

After leaving the tea party arrangements to Cordula, I devoted myself to my studies while praying for Lady Rozemyne's recovery. I wanted to have as much free time as possible when she returned.

"Lady Hannelore, it seems that Lady Rozemyne is visiting the library."

"Let us go at once."

I put away my books and wasted no time heading to the library. Archduke candidates tended not to visit themselves, as they needed to bring their attendants, scholars, and knights with them in what made for an uncomfortably large crowd. It was far more efficient to instruct an apprentice scholar to go in one's stead and take out whatever book was desired.

I wonder why Lady Rozemyne reads in the library...

An archduke candidate going to the library every day would inconvenience not just the retainers who had to accompany them, but also the laynobles who wished to borrow carrels. One's retainers had classes to consider as well, and I could only imagine that Lady Rozemyne's were struggling a great deal to balance their studies alongside their lady's reading habits.

Could it be that Lady Rozemyne's retainers have all finished their classes, then? Or alternatively, is there a rule that says the master of those large shumils must spend a certain amount of time here in the library? The latter option seemed very possible, considering that the two magic tools had previously been under the care of Sovereign archnoble librarians.

I suppose I could never have been their master after all.

It was as I pondered these things that we arrived at the library. Lady Rozemyne was nowhere to be seen on the first floor of the reading room. My continued searching must have been somewhat obvious, as Professor Solange soon approached me.

"Lady Hannelore of Dunkelfelger," she said, "is there something I can help you with?"

"I was told that Lady Rozemyne of Ehrenfest is here," I replied.

"My apologies, but she has already returned to her dormitory. She came only to inform me that she is returning to Ehrenfest sooner than planned due to her poor health."

"I... I see. I thank you ever so much for telling me."

In my honest opinion, I deserved the highest praise for managing to maintain my smile without faltering. After walking all the way to the library on so many occasions, it was hard to believe that my efforts had ultimately been in vain.

How is this even possible?! She's leaving before I even had the chance to apologize! I'm convinced—Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time *must hate me.*

I resisted the urge to collapse onto the ground then and there and somehow managed to get back to the dormitory. Once I was in my room, I allowed my disappointment to show, while Cordula sympathetically shook her head.

"You are not to blame, milady. Your timing was simply unfortunate."

"Cordula, that does not make me feel even a little better."

Is there truly no way to fix my consistently poor timing...?

I was sad enough already, but the events that followed made me feel even worse. First, my tea party invitation intended for Lady Rozemyne had ended up being delivered to Lord Wilfried—and such a message from a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate simply couldn't be refused. I had half a mind to cancel the whole affair, but with how eager the other girls were to learn about Ehrenfest trends, I was too hesitant to actually do so.

Forgive me, Lord Wilfried...

After that, I found out that accepting my invitation had put Lord Wilfried in a situation where he had no choice but to accept invitations from several other duchies as well, which depressed me even further. I apologized on the inside again and again as he put on a brave smile and answered the slew of questions put to him as normally as he could, despite the inevitable discomfort of attending a tea party of only girls.

I really am sorry. I never expected this to happen!

And then, I nearly fainted when I heard that Professor Rauffen had challenged Ehrenfest to a ditter rematch. His praise had mostly been for Lady Rozemyne and the schemes she had devised, so it hadn't even crossed my mind that he might challenge them while she was absent. Perhaps he didn't even know she was gone.

Oh, Lord Wilfried... I can't even begin to describe how sorry I am!

After all of my hardships, I didn't think I was asking for too much. I just wanted Dregarnuhr to bless me with her divine protection, even if only for a short while.

Wilfried — Tea Parties for Girls

Rozemyne was a sore loser even after Father ordered her back to Ehrenfest. She was able to delay her return home for three days by saying that she needed time to prepare, but after that, she gave up the fight and complied.

On countless occasions since the Royal Academy term began, I had put my head in my hands and wondered what nonsense Rozemyne must have done to cause me so many problems. But now, my little sister was gone. There would be no more library antics, no more incidents with greater duchies and members of royalty, and no more problems that outraged everyone back at home. In other words, I could finally relax and enjoy some time to myself.

“Even after finishing almost every single one of my classes, I’ve found myself with painfully little time to unwind,” I mused aloud. “Most of my spare time has been spent writing reports about Rozemyne, but now... I’m free.”

“I will similarly be able to focus on my classes now that we do not need to send reports,” Ignaz said, sighing with relief alongside everyone else who had assisted me in writing reports to Uncle. Rozemyne’s penchant for causing so much trouble had put an extra burden on my retainers, meaning only a few of them had managed to finish their classes. And although I was meant to have more time on my hands, I was struggling to even leave the dormitory.

“You should all finish your classes as soon as you can,” I said.

“Understood.”

In the end, my newfound freedom was tragically short-lived. It lasted only until the evening that very same day, when Isidore, my retainer and a third-year apprentice attendant, brought me an invitation from Dunkelfelger.

“An invitation to a tea party?” I said. “That reminds me—Lady Hannelore mentioned wanting to invite Rozemyne to one.” Our conversation during schtappe class was still fresh in my mind.

“I received no such report on that matter...” Oswald said with a frown.

“Apologies. It was discussed only casually during class, and since it had to do with Rozemyne, I didn’t think a report was necessary. She wanted to invite Rozemyne to a tea party to apologize for Lord Lestilaut’s rudeness. This must be her following up on that. Doesn’t seem like she made it in time, though...” I glanced down at the invitation. Lady Hannelore would probably be disappointed, but there was no helping it now. “Isidore, since Rozemyne’s already returned to Ehrenfest, have her retainers turn Lady Hannelore down. I’m sure they don’t want me holding an invitation meant for them.”

I went to give the letter back, sure that Rozemyne’s retainers who had yet to leave could deal with the matter, but Isidore made no attempt to accept it. Instead, he exchanged glances with Oswald and then said, “Unfortunately, Lord Wilfried... this is one invitation you must accept.”

“But why...? Lady Hannelore made it perfectly clear that she wanted to invite Rozemyne. She won’t want me there, regardless of the situation,” I tried to explain. Lady Hannelore was curious about *Rozemyne*, not me. She had asked about *her* plans, not mine. And yet, Isidore was adamant.

My head attendant, Oswald, crossed his arms. “Please look closely, Lord Wilfried. This invitation is not addressed to Lady Rozemyne in particular, but to all of our duchy’s archduke candidates. As this includes you, it would be rude for you to refuse.”

Say what?!

It was one thing to attend a tea party with other boys present, but the idea of attending one meant only for girls sounded excruciatingly awkward. And yet here I was, being told that I couldn’t refuse?

“I’ve already spread the word that Rozemyne has left,” I said. “Can I still not turn down the invitation? I mean, Lady Hannelore meant it for Rozemyne, and this is a tea party for girls, right?”

Oswald shook his head. “That is not the problem. According to your report just now, she wishes to apologize for Lord Lestilaut’s rudeness, correct? This letter also states that she hopes to use this opportunity to deepen the bonds between our duchies.”

“That’s true, but...”

“In other words, Lady Hannelore is of the opinion that

Dunkelfelger was in the wrong regarding the treasure-stealing ditter incident, and she wishes to apologize for it."

I nodded. We had expected another incident to occur, considering how obsessed Dunkelfelger had been with the library magic tools, but if an archduke candidate like Lady Hannelore was so openly against her own duchy's actions, she would most likely be able to stop Lord Lestilaut from making it a repeat incident.

"That sounds good," I said.

"Indeed. Lady Hannelore will most likely serve as an ally to Ehrenfest, and that is precisely why we must be so careful," Oswald explained. He gestured to the letter that was still in my hand, directing my attention to where the sender's name was written. "This invitation is from Lady Hannelore herself—not from Lord Lestilaut, who is responsible for the incident, or from Dunkelfelger as a whole. In other words, Lord Lestilaut does not regret what happened, and the guilt that Lady Hannelore feels is entirely her own."

I continued to nod as Oswald spoke, but I couldn't help feeling that he was extrapolating far too much from what was pretty much just a name. I certainly didn't want anyone to expect me to read that much into a simple letter.

"If you refuse this invitation," Oswald continued, "then you are telling Lady Hannelore that Ehrenfest refuses to accept even her personal apology."

"That can't be right!"

"It is addressed to our duchy's archduke candidates, not to one particular person. Your refusal is equivalent to Ehrenfest stubbornly refusing Dunkelfelger," Oswald said dryly. "Lady Rozemyne is not here, which is why you must be the one to attend."

"Tea parties in Ehrenfest weren't like this at all..." I muttered, trying to stop my head from spinning. It had never occurred to me that a single meeting could have such a colossal impact on interduchy diplomacy.

"Tea parties held within a duchy affect faction politics, while those held in the Royal Academy affect interduchy politics," Oswald explained. "Thus, it would be problematic if you were to casually socialize with royals and top-ranking duchies as Lady Rozemyne does. Even this incident was due to her refusing to relent to Dunkelfelger's demands, no? If she had simply not fussed over the magic tools and respected the duchy rankings, the conflict that started all this would never have happened.”

Oswald then elaborated on the importance of personal status and not resisting the flow of events imposed by those greater than ourselves. Ehrenfest had ranked among the bottom duchies prior to the civil war, but now we were a middle-ranked duchy, which made us the target of a great deal of resentment and envy from those beneath us. Apparently, taking care not to stick out was important for our socializing.

But if our intention is to keep our heads down, won’t socializing in the Royal Academy be impossible for Rozemyne? She looked so much younger than the other students that she would automatically draw attention to herself wherever she went—I already knew that much from my daily reports.

“In conclusion,” Oswald said, “this invitation is addressed to Ehrenfest’s archduke candidates, indicating that their priority is to attain our forgiveness. Had this simply been about socializing with Lady Rozemyne, Lady Hannelore would have sent the letter to her in particular.”

“No, that can’t be it...” I replied. “I’m guessing it’s because Lady Hannelore has never actually met Rozemyne in person.” You couldn’t send personal letters to someone you had never interacted with, which I thought was a more likely explanation for why she had addressed the invitation to Ehrenfest as a whole.

Oswald watched me quizzically. “But did you not say Lady Hannelore is a first-year?”

“She is.”

“In that case, would they not have shared classes? I could understand them not having spoken if they weren’t the same gender or were being taught in separate rooms, but they are both young women and archduke candidates...”

Most of my retainers agreed with Oswald, since his words were so deeply founded in common sense, but my apprentice archknight Gregor shook his head. He alone had attended the first-year classes with me, so he understood the problem all too well.

“It makes sense that they might not have met,” Gregor said. “Lady Rozemyne attended the majority of her classes only a single time, and not once have I seen her speak to students from other duchies.”

I nodded in agreement. Rozemyne had passed not just her written lessons in one go, but almost all of her practical ones too.

Her head was filled with nothing but thoughts of completing her first-year studies, so I assumed she hadn't even considered socializing with the other students.

And yet, despite being a veritable stranger to her classmates and spending her days holed up in the library, Rozemyne was somehow on good terms with the Sovereignty's Prince Anastasius and Klassenberg's Lady Eglantine. Her social sphere was absurd to me, but there was nothing to gain from confirming what a peculiar character she was for the billionth time. All that mattered right now was the Dunkelfelger tea party, and the unfortunate fact that I needed to attend.

"I don't want to, but... I guess I have no choice," I eventually conceded. "I'll go to the tea party. I should say, though—I've only ever been to girls' tea parties when my grandmother had visitors, or when there were family tea parties with Mother and Charlotte. Do you think I'll be alright?" I turned to my retainers for reassurance, but they were all exchanging worried glances.

After what felt like a painfully long silence, Oswald gave a heavy sigh. "We are similarly concerned, Lord Wilfried. We attendants have learned the basics of female socializing, but we have not attended a girls-only tea party for quite some time. The common understandings and fashion of young women can change suddenly and dramatically. Not to mention, we are dealing with a greater duchy—something that Ehrenfest has rarely needed to do throughout its entire history."

In short, Oswald and my other attendants were all men, and none were experts on female socializing. It was easy to foresee us struggling with the challenge ahead.

"What should we do?" I asked.

"Might I suggest asking Lady Rozemyne's remaining attendants for assistance? They have experience attending tea parties with Prince Anastasius and the Klassenberg archduke candidate, and as I understand it, Lady Rozemyne has ordered them to help us. Furthermore, as they were previously accompanying her to her daily library excursions, I am sure they have finished most of their lessons."

I was far from pleased with how hard Rozemyne had worked her retainers just so that she could surround herself with books, but it seemed that her rampages did on occasion prove useful.

"Right," I said. "Retainers who have finished their classes and don’t have any pressing matters to attend to are exactly what we need. And these were supposed to be Rozemyne’s tea parties in the first place. I’ll ask them to handle this Dunkelfelger business.”

And so, the decision was made. It really was logical to leave the preparations to them, since they had so much more free time than my own retainers, who were mostly still busy with their classes.

“It is a privilege to be attending a Dunkelfelger tea party.”

“I imagine that coming here was not easy for you, Lord Wilfried, so I am glad you made it,” Lady Hannelore replied, lowering her red eyes slightly in a way that conveyed the guilt she was feeling.

I glanced around the room, and in an instant, the last of my hope disappeared. There really weren’t any other boys for me to share my struggle with, but I made sure to hide my disappointment as I said, “I see Lord Lestilaut is not here.”

“My apologies...” Lady Hannelore replied. “This is a personal tea party, so he could not come.”

“I understand. Really, I do. Think nothing of it.”

I took in a slow breath, trying to pump myself up while heading to the seat that was offered to me. It was frightening to be surrounded by a gang of girls, their eyes gleaming in anticipation of who knew what, but I made sure to keep my chin up and didn’t forget to smile.

I’m going to be fine. They’re not scarier than Uncle, Wilfried. They’re not scarier than Uncle.

I chanted those words in my heart like a spell and glanced at all the gathered retainers. Rozemyne’s apprentice attendants were giving our gifts to the Dunkelfelger attendants, while her apprentice scholar was preparing a pen. They all seemed used to the routine, maybe because they had attended the Klassenberg tea party. It was good to have them here, especially when my own retainers were so terrified about this being an all-girls meeting.

“Oh, Lord Wilfried, are these new and popular sweets from Ehrenfest?” Lady Hannelore asked.

“Yes, this is called pound cake.”

“I see there are two flavors. Are they both pound cakes? It is quite unusual for variations of the same dish to look quite so different.”

“Y-Yes. They are both pound cakes.”

This isn't good. This really *isn't good. I don't know how to keep conversations going here.*

Rozemyne was the one who had come up with pound cake and made it popular throughout Ehrenfest. Sure, I may have eaten it on several occasions at the castle, but I didn't know how many types existed or anything about the flavors we had with us. I was aware that one was something called "puh-lein" and the other was rumtopf, but I didn't know which was which.

Under normal circumstances, I could easily resolve this problem by asking Oswald, but I couldn't turn around and start speaking to my retainers during a tea party with other duchies. The most they could do was offer brief words of advice while refreshing my tea.

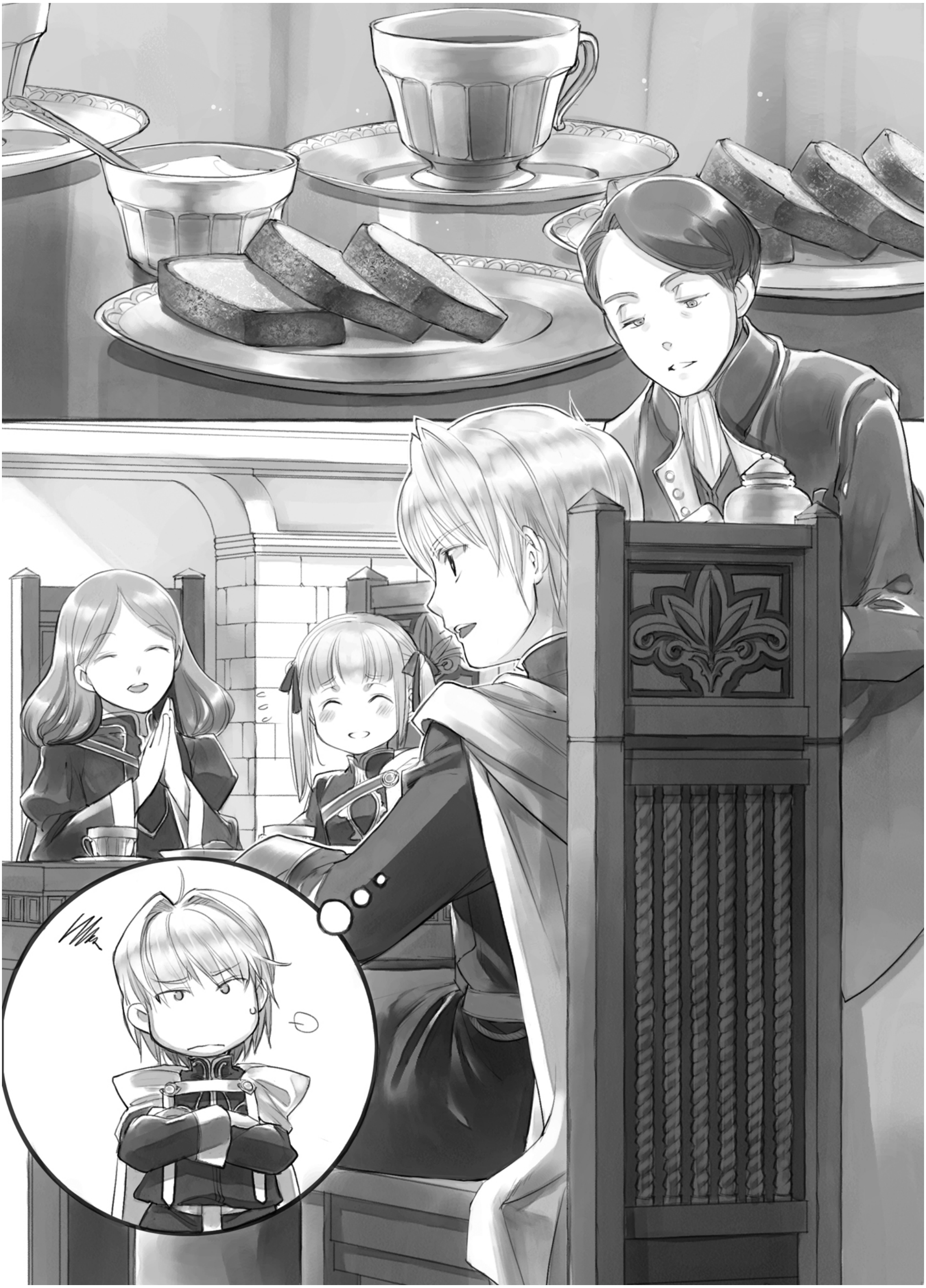
I raised my cup a little, signaling that I wanted a refill. Oswald promptly stepped forward and took my cup with a polite, "Excuse me."

Now!

"Oswald, which pound cake is the puh-lein one?" I asked, keeping my voice so quiet that only he could hear me. I made sure to keep a smile on my face all the while, so as to avoid raising suspicion.

My head attendant stepped away for a moment to pour me more tea, his expression completely unchanged, then returned with my steaming beverage. "The one with nothing in it," he replied briskly and in an equally low voice.

Perfect. So that one's puh-lein, and the one with stuff inside is rumtopf.



I struggled to understand why Rozemyne had given the sweet such a strange name to begin with. It wasn't at all useful when it came to identifying what it was made of, which made it very unforgiving.

"Lord Wilfried, what has been used to flavor this one?" Lady Hannelore asked.

"For that one?" I repeated. "Rumtopf."

Wait... Is that right? And, I mean, what even is rumtopf?

That same question must have run through the mind of the girl sitting beside me, as she proceeded to ask, "Erm, what *is* rumtopf, exactly? It tastes very strongly of wine. Is it a flavor preferred by men?"

Oswald—I need answers!

He had refilled my cup a mere moment ago, so using that trick again wasn't an option. This was something I needed to overcome on my own, and to that end, I turned my unfaltering smile on her and said, "I personally enjoy rumtopf, but perhaps the taste is not to most women's liking. Next time, I will prepare something that tastes less strongly of wine, to better suit your preferences."

"Oh my. I am ever so looking forward to it."

Yes... Yes! That actually worked!

It was like I was hanging over the edge of a cliff, but little did I know, the worst was yet to come. I was getting away with vague answers because the girls could simply try the pound cake for themselves, but when the topic shifted to rinsham and hairpins, the atmosphere abruptly became sharper than expected.

"The girls of your duchy drew much attention during the fellowship gatherings. Just what must one use to make their hair so glossy?"

"How is rinsham made? Oh, is that a secret, I suppose? I have heard that Ehrenfest plans to start selling it in the future. I would love to have some myself."

"I find the hairpins Lady Rozemyne wears to be wonderful. Is there a craftsman I could order one of my own from?"

The girls' questions came all at once like a barrage.

Wait, wait, wait! I can't keep up with all of you, and there's no way I can answer a question I can't hear! To start with, Father's the one who'll make the trade decisions, not me. And all these questions about *seeing or trying some rinsham and what it feels like are completely lost on me, because I don't know what it's like to use the kind of rinsham made for girls.*

As the tea party went on and on, I could only maintain a smile and continually say, "Please ask Lady Rozemyne upon her return." It was a struggle that I was forced to endure, like all the times Grandmother had propped me up and showered me with praise.

It's finally over...

Rozemyne's retainers had carried out all the necessary preparations for the tea party, but they hadn't given me any of the information required to answer the girls' questions. To make matters worse, her attendants had focused on speaking with other attendants, while her scholars focused on exchanging intelligence. I was serving as their lord for the day, but they had ignored my plight entirely, neither glancing my way nor offering any assistance whatsoever.

This tea party was being held for your lady! I was fighting for my life trying to respond to all those girls, so how about you be a little more considerate of me?!

I was very frustrated with those retainers, but since Rozemyne and their mentor Rihyarda were absent, they had no figures of authority to scold them. Oswald had informed me that I couldn't chastise them myself either, since they weren't in my service, so I was forced to suppress my anger. I decided it was for the best, and that there was no point making such a fuss over a onetime occurrence... but then more and more invitations started to arrive.

"Why are we still receiving so many?" I asked. "I made it perfectly clear that Rozemyne has returned to Ehrenfest."

"Perhaps because they have determined that you are equipped to attend female tea parties," Oswald suggested. "Or maybe rinsham and pound cake are so enticing that they are simply desperate to beat the other duchies in learning more about them."

The Royal Academy's socializing season was meant to be in the latter half of the term, when most students had finished their lessons. Few people were holding tea parties and mingling with others during these early weeks.

"Oswald... do I need to attend all of these?"

"Yes, especially considering that these ones are addressed to you specifically."

No matter how much I glared at the huge stack of invitations, it didn't become any smaller. And so, due to Rozemyne being absent, I was forced to attend countless all-girl tea parties. My retainers had a hard time of it too, as they were forced to accompany me.

"Girls-only tea parties are exhausting..." I said. "I want to socialize with men too."

"I truly understand how you feel."

In an unbelievable twist, during our struggle to keep up with all the tea parties that shouldn't have been our responsibility in the first place, one of Rozemyne's apprentice attendants had complained to Oswald about having to help us.

"She said that you are asking too much of them, considering that you aren't their lord," he explained to me. "It seems that she would rather you not accept every single invitation and instead start refusing some."

"Just what is that attendant thinking?" I asked. "I may not be her lord, but I am a member of the archducal family, and with Rozemyne not here, it's up to me to lead the dormitory."

"You are exactly correct. If ordered, the apprentice attendants will not be able to refuse you," Oswald said, nodding in agreement. Rozemyne's retainers just lacked the motivation to work, apparently. I could only hope that they would come to understand the needs of those above them a little better.

"Plus, we're all nobles of the Florencia faction," I added. "They should really be a bit more cooperative."

"These girls in particular are more from the Leisegang than the Florencia faction," Oswald noted, correcting me. "The Leisegang faction has a long history of acting unreasonably toward the archducal family, making many demands and generally being hostile for little good reason."

Apparently, the Leisegangs had done a lot to make Grandmother miserable in the past. They had bullied her when she was young, refused to accept an archducal bride who had married into Ehrenfest from Ahrensbach, and even plotted to have a Leisegang become my father's second wife. It came as no surprise that she was so angry with them.

"It seems very likely that Lady Rozemyne being adopted by the archduke has caused the Leisegangs to become even more riled up than before," Oswald said. "However, these girls must understand that the archducal family stands above them. Please act firmly going forward, Lord Wilfried."

"Is it just me, or is Lady Rozemyne not disciplining her retainers properly?" I asked, recalling that she and Rihyarda had complained at length to my own retainers about my progress in class. They had been pretty smug then, but what now? She wasn't even training her own retinue properly.

"Lord Wilfried, please do not mistake the Leisegangs being troublesome with Lady Rozemyne not training those in her service well enough."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Her retainers were selected only after she came to the Royal Academy. And do you recall how much time passed between that happening and her leaving? A mere month. We cannot expect too much."

Their unhelpfulness definitely stood out, but when I considered that they had only been in Rozemyne's service for a month, everything made more sense. They couldn't compare to my own retainers, who had been serving me for so many years.

I'll endure it for now, but hopefully they'll have matured a little more by next year.

After convincing myself that there was no point in getting mad at them, I very begrudgingly started on a reply of acceptance for the latest tea party invitation.

Angelica — A Guard Knight at the Temple

"Mother, Father, may I stay in the temple during the Dedication Ritual?" I asked. "That's when the blizzards are the worst, and Lady Rozemyne is worried about me commuting every day."

Lord Ferdinand and the commander had given their permission for me to stay in the temple, but only if my parents were willing to allow it. I wasn't really happy about that, since my parents usually opposed me doing most things, but I was asking anyway.

"Surely the temple is no place for an unmarried woman," my mother replied, sounding worried. "And this would mean spending the nights there as well, no? Are you really going to be okay?"

I tilted my head blankly. I didn't get it. "Lady Rozemyne isn't married yet, but she was raised in the temple. And as her guard knight, I think it's normal for me to go wherever she does. Is it really as dangerous as you think, Mother? If so, that's even more reason for me to stay by her side."

The temple hadn't seemed dangerous when I first went there a few days ago, met Lady Rozemyne's gray priest attendants, and was told what to do by Damuel. I hadn't been there since, because I was training with my master, Lord Bonifatius. Our sessions together had seemed more like an interrogation than anything else. He really loved Lady Rozemyne, and he always asked me questions about what she was like in the Royal Academy.

Master had at last granted me permission to go to the temple, but if the place was as dangerous as my parents made it sound, I would need to be more on guard. It was always important to be aware of potential threats ahead of time, and with that in mind, my hand strayed to Stenluke.

Father sighed and waved a dismissive hand at me. "The danger of which we speak isn't the kind you're thinking of... And in any case, my beloved wife, while some of the rumors are a bit concerning, the temple has changed a great deal. Lady Rozemyne is the new High Bishop, and Lord Ferdinand maintains a watchful eye as the High Priest. It's also important to remember that nobles were forbidden from entering the temple for the two years that Lady Rozemyne was in her jureve."

"Oh, I see..." I muttered. "I think I understand now." I didn't really care about the temple, so this was all news to me, but Lady Rozemyne had evidently brought about a lot of change. It was probably like how she had changed the children's playroom.

"Not to mention," my father continued, "visiting the temple was one of the conditions of Angelica being assigned as Lady Rozemyne's guard knight, remember? I don't think her staying the night is going to be a problem."

"Visiting the temple is *completely* different from spending the night there," Mother protested, continuing to refuse in spite of my father's approval. I already knew from experience that trying to change her mind would only make her double down, so I remained silent and stared at Father. It was best to wait patiently for her to relax.

"Angelica managed to finish all of her Royal Academy classes midway through winter. It's clear how much effort Lady Rozemyne put into helping her, and if she wishes for our daughter to stay at the temple, it must be done. Such is the duty of a loyal retainer. Angelica, you may dedicate the rest of the winter to your lady."

"Yes, Father."

I gave a big nod, recalling that Lady Rozemyne was the one who had decided to teach me the fourth step of the mana compression method. If not for that reward, I certainly wouldn't have been able to return home with her.

"But what will Angelica's fiancé think of her staying in the temple...?" Mother asked.

"She is to marry Lord Traugott, after some involvement from Lord Bonifatius," my father replied. "Their marriage wouldn't be canceled over something this trivial—although, to be frank, I would feel much better if rumors of my daughter visiting the temple *did* result in such an outcome."

Father was slumping his shoulders, while Mother gave me a similarly troubled smile. At times like this, I usually felt a bit sad that I was disappointing my parents... but not this time. I puffed out my chest with pride, fully aware that, on this occasion, I could grant their wish.

"Mother, Father, there is no need to fret," I said. "Lord Traugott resigned from being Lady Rozemyne's guard knight, so our engagement will be canceled. Rihyarda and Lord Bonifatius are holding a family meeting to settle things, and we've been asked to wait until they contact us."

Both my parents stared at me with wide eyes before eventually managing to choke out an "Excuse me?" For some reason, they didn't look very pleased about the engagement falling through. Their surprised expressions smelled of danger. For me.

What now...?

They were so taken aback that they didn't say anything else. I sensed that they were about to ply me with questions I couldn't answer, which would only be annoying and painful, so I turned around and left the room before they could collect themselves. I already had permission from Father to stay in the temple, so I wasted no time flying to the castle.

That was close...

Having escaped from my parents, I met with Damuel at the knight dormitory and then left for the temple. Lady Rozemyne was waiting for me when I arrived, and she greeted me with a smile.

"Angelica. It somehow feels like so long since I last saw you."

I couldn't help but agree. I always felt like I was closest to my true self when on guard duty—maybe because it gave me a clear task to fulfill.

Lady Rozemyne practiced the harspiel even while she was in the temple, and seeing her practice so hard without any musicians really showed me how hard it was to be an archduke candidate. Had we been held to the same academic standard, there was no way I would have graduated from the Royal Academy.

At third bell, Lady Rozemyne went to the High Priest's chambers to help Lord Ferdinand with his work. Damuel and I followed our lady as guard knights, and I could only watch as one stack of paperwork after another was piled on the desk before her. She soon had as much work as would normally be given to an adult, at which point she casually mentioned that she could only really help with math.

"I think doing this much math is amazing..." I said. An awed sigh escaped me as I thought about how talented Lady Rozemyne had to be to manage so much proper work despite having only recently entered the Royal Academy. My thoughts were soon interrupted, however, as Ferdinand started giving out instructions.

“Eckhart, handle this. Damuel, handle these. Angelica, work with Damuel and—”

“I shall guard the door with my life,” I quickly interjected. This was my first time hearing of a guard knight being made to do math work, so I hurriedly glued myself to the door instead. My Royal Academy days and all the studying I had to do there were finally over; I didn’t want to go back.

I was steeling my resolve to refuse work as many times as was necessary... but Lord Ferdinand gave in immediately. “Attempting to give work to the incompetent is a waste of time,” he said. “Let us begin.” And with that, everyone but me began to work their assigned jobs.

Wow... Lord Ferdinand really is wonderful.

His rational approach moved me; it really was a waste of time to waste time like that. I couldn’t do math—Father would always grimace and say that I made things take twice as long—but for some reason, my parents and other family really wanted me to do paperwork anyway. Of course, all that did was frustrate them, and they would often complain about how slow I was, how many mistakes I made, and how much extra time it would take them to redo everything. It happened so much that I couldn’t understand why they hadn’t given up on their complaining. Not to mention, them reminding me of my incompetence always made me feel sad.

The room was filled only with the low noise of working calculators and fervent scribbling. There must not have been a distinction between scholars and attendants in the temple, as Lady Rozemyne’s attendants were all doing paperwork as well.

I glanced around the High Priest’s chambers from where I was standing at the door. Indeed, the High Bishop, High Priest, and all their attendants were doing work—including Damuel and Lord Eckhart, even though they were guard knights. Maybe I was expected to help out as well.

I think I underestimated guard duty in the temple...

All of a sudden, there was the ring of a bell on the other side of the door. A gray priest working near me stood up and walked over. “Welcome, Brother Kampfer. We’ve been expecting you,” he said as he opened the door, revealing a blue priest and his attendants.

My hand was already resting on Stenluke by the time the door was opened. Our guests saw me, and their eyes immediately widened.

"This is Lady Angelica, who will now be accompanying Lady Rozemyne to the temple as her guard," the gray priest explained. "Lady Angelica, they have come to deliver paperwork. There is no need to be so on edge."

"Oh..."

I wasn't familiar with the bell for guests, and the fact I was so on guard against a simple paperwork delivery had clearly surprised the new arrivals.

Come fourth bell, it was time for lunch. Damuel and I were taking turns, with one of us eating while the other stood guard for Lady Rozemyne while she ate. My initial thought was that I would scarf down my food as quickly as possible, as I normally would in the knight dormitory... but it tasted so good that I ended up going slower than I thought.

"It tastes as good as the food in the Royal Academy..." I noted.

"Lady Rozemyne's personal chef made this, so it shouldn't be any different from the food served in the castle," Monika replied; she was serving both Damuel and me. "Lord Damuel enjoys eating here. I'm glad that you enjoy it as well, Lady Angelica."

After my meal, Monika started pouring my tea—and it was then that she asked for a moment of my time. It seemed that she wanted to speak to me about life in the temple.

I can listen, but I can't guarantee that I'll remember anything.

"As you are going to be living in the temple, Lady Angelica... I wanted to seek your permission for something."

"Yes?"

"I am told that noblewomen only have attendants of the same gender, but as you will be sharing Lady Rozemyne's attendants here, that will not be the case," Monika began. I recalled the temple attendants, and indeed, some of them were men. "Nicola, Wilma from the orphanage, or I will carry out any tasks that require you to be touched, such as bathing or changing clothes. However, we will not have enough time to carry in bathwater, clean your room, or serve your food without the assistance of male gray priests. For that reason, may we have your permission for men to enter your room?"

It was only then that I realized male attendants basically never entered my room. Maybe this was why my parents had said the temple was dangerous; it was probably a big deal to most noblewomen.

"This may be hard for a noble to imagine, but the temple has almost no magic tools," Monika continued. "We draw water from wells, heat it ourselves for baths, and clean rooms by hand. As there are so few female attendants here, we simply cannot manage everything on our own."

I half-listened to her explanation, but I was mostly thinking about how to get through this with as little stress as possible. I didn't really understand, but a single careless report would be enough for my parents to restart their complaining about me taking up guard duty here.

"Is this what happened with Brigitte?" I asked.

"Yes," Monika replied. "The same thing sometimes happened in her home province, Illgner, so she gave her permission."

If the little sister of a giebe said it was fine, there shouldn't be an issue with me doing the same. Right?

"If such is the way of the temple, I do not mind," I declared, trying to look as cool and sharp as I could.

Monika sighed with relief and thanked me; at the very least, it seemed that my answer was what they had wanted. She poured my tea, said that she was going to change places with Zahm, then left. Lady Rozemyne had a health examination in the afternoon, so Monika needed to finish eating as quickly as she could.

Looks like being an attendant in the temple is pretty rough too.

Zahm was fixing me with a concerned stare as he prepared food for Damuel, which I took as a signal to take over guarding Lady Rozemyne. I finished my tea, then did so.

Next was Lady Rozemyne's examination, but Lord Ferdinand had permitted me to spend that time training with Lord Eckhart instead—more proof that he was a very, very good person. Cornelius had warned me about him before I came to the temple, saying that I needed to protect Lady Rozemyne from him and that he was "scary beyond words, considering that he's her guardian," but he wasn't scary at all.

Lord Eckhart told me to change into a full set of armor, since we were going outside, so I did just that. He then guided me to a door near the High Bishop's chambers, which was opened to reveal a fierce blizzard. Barely visible among the snow was the white

Noble's Gate.

"Angelica, do you see the plaza by the Noble's Gate?" Lord Eckhart asked. "That's where carriages are stopped when the gate is opened. Let's train there. It's the perfect place, since nobody else will be going out in this weather."

"Understood, Lord Eckhart."

I formed my highbeast and followed after him. The snow buffeted my side, which was annoying and caused quite the racket, but the mostly unchanging temperature of my feystone armor meant it wasn't too bad otherwise. For no real reason, I remembered Lady Rozemyne being wrapped in layers upon layers to fend off the cold. Maybe it would be good for her to join the knight course and learn to make feystone armor herself.

I don't think she ever will, though. She doesn't like ditter.

Lord Eckhart paused in the air when we arrived at the Noble's Gate. I tried to do the same, but the blizzard was so strong that it was hard to keep my highbeast steady.

"Moving through a blizzard doesn't seem too hard, but staying in place is another story entirely, right?" Lord Eckhart called to me. He was perfectly still, but when I tried to follow his example, the onslaught of snow bumped me around. I would never have thought that staying in place in a blizzard required a lot more mana than flying.

"I wasn't expecting to struggle so much," I replied. "I usually practice in the castle's training grounds, so this is my first time training in a strong blizzard."

"Not surprising. Training in weather like this is normally done to prepare for hunting the Lord of Winter, and the Knight's Order doesn't have time to include apprentices who won't actually be joining the hunt. That said, if things were better, training in such weather would be made essential for all knights. Those without the necessary experience won't be able to stabilize their highbeast or swing their weapons in the midst of a blizzard."

Lord Eckhart then taught me how to properly endure the blizzard and stabilize my highbeast enough to fight in the snow. Throwing weapons were apparently more dangerous in such weather than mana attacks, since they didn't glow or make their presence known. You had to be especially on guard against them.

"I like training with you, Lord Eckhart. You're very strong."

"Same to you. Seems like Grandfather's training is doing wonders for you. And your willingness to turn your blade on even Lord Ferdinand to protect your lady was a sight to behold."

"I am honored."

Lord Eckhart had praised me. According to him, guard knights needed to be wary of all people at all times so they could protect their lord or lady.

"You commend my actions, Lord Eckhart, but if I had actually attacked Lord Ferdinand, would you have been able to protect him?"

"Of course," he replied with a smile. "If Lord Ferdinand hadn't stopped me—*bam*."

No sooner had the last word passed his lips than something struck my arm, specifically in a spot that was usually only covered with cloth when I was wearing my light armor. I gazed down and saw a small dagger falling toward the snow. If not for the fact I was wearing full armor, it would have pierced through me for sure.

If Lord Ferdinand hadn't stopped him, then...

I shuddered at the thought. Even with the blizzard in full force, Lord Eckhart's aim was expertly precise. It wouldn't have been hard for him to strike me in the neck. It wasn't his precision that surprised me, though—it was the fact that I hadn't even noticed him throwing the dagger, even though this was training and I was completely on guard.

A stealth attack... I didn't have a clue.

It was an attack unlike any that my master was training me to use. I couldn't imagine that he would ever use it himself either. A bubbling heat began writhing inside of me; in a battle against Lord Eckhart, I simply wouldn't be able to protect Lady Rozemyne. I needed to learn to block that kind of attack. I needed to learn his technique. And with those realizations made, my next goal was decided.

"Let's start training," I said.

"Schtappe weapons need a spell to transform them. Manablades glow with mana and are easy to notice. This is a normal blade, but it's perfect for wounding an enemy before they notice you've launched an attack. They become even deadlier if you throw them in the direction of the wind while in a blizzard like this."

"To think you'd need to be that on guard... Does Lord Ferdinand have enemies who are that dangerous?" I asked. These skills were far, far above anything expected of a normal knight.

Lord Eckhart looked in the direction of the castle, a gentle smile on his lips. “He did. Enemies who attacked from every angle you could conceive of... Now they’re small fry, but that’s no excuse to soften up. You should stay on guard too and start learning other means of attack than just Stenluke. Rozemyne’s in a unique position, and it’s almost a certainty that she’ll make many troublesome foes.”

I wasn’t entirely sure what he meant by Lady Rozemyne being in a unique position, but she definitely attracted a lot of danger. She had flown off on her highbeast two years ago to save Lady Charlotte and openly defied the will of a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate in the Royal Academy.

And I’m sure she’ll do more things like that in the future. Probably.

In order to serve Lady Rozemyne properly, I needed to be as skilled as Lord Eckhart. I wanted to use our training to learn as many techniques from him as I could.

Once I was able to steady myself against the blizzard and swing Stenluke without the slightest waver, we took a break by the temple door. I vanished my highbeast and started stretching my legs. My knees and thighs seemed to ache, I thought—probably from all my time spent straddling my highbeast and tensing my legs in strange ways to keep myself still.

“Angelica, would you mind me using this opportunity to ask you something?” Lord Eckhart said. “Mother wants to know what you think about your engagement to Traugott being canceled.”

“I heard about it from Rihyarda and Lord Bonifatius. I’m actually relieved, since it means I can put off getting married for a while longer.”

“You’re relieved...?”

Lord Eckhart’s eyes sharpened. My first instinct had been to give an accurate—and apparently too honest—answer. Maybe it was because I was still in my training mindset, but either way, it hadn’t been the proper conduct of a noblewoman. I racked my brain for a better response, but nothing came immediately to mind. I was terrible at thinking during training.

Or... Actually, I’m always *terrible at thinking.*

“Ah, um...” I muttered. “Rather, I am... exceedingly... feels bad...?”

“I don’t understand why you’re being so vague. You’re aware that your future is going to be shaped by whom you choose to marry, right?" Lord Eckhart asked, his mouth twisting with amusement. It seemed that, unlike my parents, he didn't get mad when I gave frank answers. That was a relief.

"My parents decide who I'll marry. I don't really care about it all, personally."

"You're a girl and you're graduating—yet you still don't care about marriage?"

"Well, I care a tiny bit... but I want to stay as Lady Rozemyne's guard knight, so I would prefer someone who'll permit me to serve her for as long as I can. I'll need to quit when I get married and have children, right? I don't want that. I would rather marry someone who doesn't want kids—who wants me as their second or third wife, not first. And, although this might be asking a bit much... I would prefer someone stronger than me, so we can train together. I couldn't ask for anything more at that point."

Lord Eckhart met my honest desires with a very serious look. I knew those eyes well—they were the eyes of someone who couldn't believe or even comprehend what they had just heard.

And that's not good, I think.

It seemed that my answer had not been appropriate for a noblewoman. I decided to apologize at once and ask that he keep our exchange a secret, and with that in mind, I placed a hand on my cheek and cast my eyes downward. In my experience, this pose made people most likely to forgive me. It was my best means of escaping from a painful conversation.

"I truly apologize," I said. "It seems that I have said too much. Please keep this a secret from my parents; they often yell at me for saying things I shouldn't in public."

"Well... I think it's best to put feelings like that out into the open. You never know who might agree with you. I'm sure your parents will try to be accommodating."

I really doubted that, but cutting this conversation short was my top priority. "I pray that is the case," I said, allowing a smile onto my lips as I continued to look down.

Lord Eckhart nodded and said nothing more.

Yes! It worked again!

"Now, Lord Eckhart... Let's continue our training."

Lord Eckhart paused for a moment and then chuckled. "I think I understand why your parents tell you not to speak so freely." And with that remark, he stood up, indicating that it was time for us to get moving.

"Angelica, you must not be so susceptible to tricks," Lady Rozemyne said, reprimanding me as soon as I finished training and returned to the High Bishop's chambers. But who had tricked me? I couldn't remember being tricked, and no matter how much I struggled to think of a good response, nothing came to mind. In the end, I simply went ahead and gave a report on my training with Lord Eckhart.

I'll ask Damuel about why she scolded me later.

I waited for Lady Rozemyne to bathe before putting my question to him. He sighed and said, "So you didn't understand after all. I thought as much. She scolded you because you went off to train with Lord Eckhart after Lord Ferdinand pushed you to."

"I still don't see the issue," I replied, now feeling even more confused.

Damuel put his head in his hands. "It was *Lord Ferdinand* who suggested it. Lady Rozemyne didn't give her permission, did she?"

"I see at last..."

"You don't understand anything, do you?" Damuel asked—a question that we both knew the answer to. He knew me so well. "Let's pretend you're on your way to the aub's office with Lady Rozemyne when Lord Wilfried suggests that you train with his knights. How do you respond?"

"I would say: 'Maybe after my shift is over, if my lady grants her permission.'" It was unthinkable for someone to speak to a knight on guard duty like that.

"Do you still not understand...?" Damuel muttered under his breath. "Alright, let's consider this another way. Lord Ferdinand isn't your lord or lady, and you were on guard duty at the time; why, then, did you agree to his suggestion and go out to train? The situation then was no different from our hypothetical with Lord Wilfried."

I looked up with a start. He was right. Neither Lord Wilfried nor Lord Ferdinand was my lord.

"But Lord Ferdinand is Lady Rozemyne's guardian, and you follow his orders too, don't you?" I asked. Lord Ferdinand was the one who gave out work in his chambers and when Lady Rozemyne was traveling between the castle and the temple. It had only made sense to obey him then, so I hadn't thought anything of obeying him again.

"As long as he isn't in direct opposition with Lady Rozemyne, I will also follow his orders," Damuel said. "But you didn't hesitate to point Stenluke at him. Isn't that because you considered the possibility that he might be hostile?"

"Cornelius instructed me to protect her from Lord Ferdinand."

"Cornelius..." Damuel repeated. His eyes grew distant, then he sighed and shook his head. "That certainly is the right mindset for a guard knight to have; even one's closest friend could one day become an enemy. But putting that aside, Lord Ferdinand didn't *order* you to train; he *suggested* it. In other words, you abandoned your guard duty at the suggestion of another without first acquiring permission. That is why Lady Rozemyne scolded you."

I abandoned my duty...?

Only then did the gravity of the situation strike me—I had done the one thing that a guard knight should never do, and it could never be taken back. My blood ran cold, and it felt as though my legs had been cut out from under me. I was so scared that my teeth began to chatter.

"M-My... My apologies," I mumbled.

Damuel gave a troubled smile. "You should apologize to Lady Rozemyne, not me. Though, at this point, that would probably just make her uncomfortable."

After showing that I was useless with temple paperwork, I had made matters worse by abandoning my guard duty too. Perhaps my luck had finally run out. Perhaps I was going to be relieved of duty. Master training me so that I could protect Lady Rozemyne, everyone tutoring me so that I could finish the Royal Academy, my own goal of serving Lady Rozemyne forever... It had all been for nothing. I could feel the spirit draining from my body, and the whole world seemed a little darker than before.

"Damuel, what can I do...?"

"You won't be relieved anytime soon," Damuel said reassuringly. "Lady Rozemyne doesn't have enough female knights as is, and it's a special case that you can guard her in the temple."

I was legally still underage, but I was allowed to leave the Noble's Quarter for guard duty due to the unique circumstances. I had finished all of my classes in the Royal Academy, and while I hadn't yet attended my coming-of-age ceremony, I was born in the summer and therefore technically old enough to be considered an adult. Damuel said that this whole situation had only come to be because there would be no female knights to accompany Lady Rozemyne otherwise.

“I suppose you’re wondering why she needs female knights,” Damuel continued. “Well, in the castle, male guard knights can’t be there when she gets changed, can they? The temple works the same way. I can’t go everywhere Lady Rozemyne does. She needs female knights for cases like the checkup earlier, when her clothes were flipped up and her skin touched. Don’t forget that.”

“Understood...”

I was aware from my time in the Ehrenfest Dormitory that there were some places only people of the same gender could go. Just because the temple had male and female attendants who both entered the High Bishop’s chambers didn’t mean that men could go anywhere... but it was only now that I was piecing this together.

“I get that you’re bad at reading the mood and understanding the deeper meaning behind words, Angelica... But you can’t be so easily strung along by the suggestions and verbal tricks of others, whether they be from Lord Ferdinand or anyone else.”

“Well, what should I do in those cases?”

Damuel gave a relieved smile—his usual expression whenever he thought he had succeeded in making me understand something. “It’s simple. Always consult Lady Rozemyne first. Now, repeat after me! ‘I will always consult my lady first!’”

“I will always consult my lady first!” I declared. “Okay... I thank you ever so much. Back then, I should have asked Lady Rozemyne whether I could train, rather than leaving straight away.”

“Perfect.”

Zahm must have been waiting for us to finish our discussion, as he appeared not even a moment later and took Damuel to the bath they had prepared for him.

“Fran,” I said, noticing that he was nearby. He seemed to be preparing a drink for when Lady Rozemyne returned from her bath. “How come Damuel is bathing first?”

Fran looked around the room, troubled, then seemed to relent with a deep exhale. “My apologies. We do not have enough female retainers for you to bathe until after Lady Rozemyne is done, and as there is not enough time for us to wait for you to finish, bathing has ceased to be in order of social rank. I apologize for the inconvenience."

"I've been told the temple has its own way of doing things. It has been a little confusing... but I can manage as long as everything is explained to me," I said, making sure to repeat in my brain the message that bathing wasn't done in order of status here.

Fran's expression softened. "I am glad that Lady Rozemyne's guard is such an understanding individual as yourself, Lady Angelica."

He finished preparing the drink just as Lady Rozemyne came out from her bath. She took the cup, brought it to her lips, and then glanced around the room. "Oh. I see Damuel has not yet finished bathing."

"He should return soon," Fran replied. The look in his eyes made me want to bury myself deep in the snow outside; Damuel was no doubt running late and throwing off everybody's schedules because he had spent so long answering my questions.

I can practically hear Father yelling at me.

Barring myself, everyone in my family was an attendant, so I fully understood the consequences of a disrupted schedule. If my father were the one being inconvenienced here, he absolutely would have given me a very harsh scolding. Sad memories of many such lectures arose in my mind.

"Apologies for the wait," Damuel said upon his return. I could tell in an instant that he had rushed to finish his bath sooner than usual.

"Um, Damuel..." I muttered.

"Sorry, Angelica, but could you bathe first? Monika and Nicola can't finish for the day until you've had your bath."

It was at this point that Nicola herself stepped forward and gave an introduction. "Thank you for your patience, Lady Angelica," she then said. "I'm going to be at your service today."

And so, I ended up returning to my room at Lady Rozemyne's order, unable to even apologize to Damuel.

"We will be done in just a moment. My apologies for the wait."

Lady Rozemyne's attendants Gil and Fritz were bringing buckets of hot water into my room one by one. It was a very strange sight—at home, in the knight dormitory, and at the Royal Academy, attendants would simply channel their mana into magic tools that filled the bath automatically.

I was a little uncomfortable to begin with—this was my first time having men enter my room, attendants or otherwise—but I soon got used to it. My concern then turned into curiosity as I realized that I hadn't seen these two in the High Bishop's chambers.

"I don't remember either of these men being in the High Bishop's chambers," I noted. "Are they Lady Rozemyne's attendants?"

"Yes, my lady," Nicola replied. "Lady Rozemyne has trusted them with managing a workshop. Gil accompanies the Gutenbergs as her representative, so he is rarely in the temple, much less the High Bishop's chambers."

As it turned out, they were working in the printing industry that Lady Rozemyne treasured so much. Fritz was around the same age as Fran and the others, while Gil only looked about as old as me. And yet, Gil was the one serving as her representative.

"How did Gil earn Lady Rozemyne's trust?"

Nicola met my unexpected question with a look of surprise, but I wanted to know. I was going to need to do a lot of work to make up for my earlier mistake.

"Fritz is the older of the two, but Lady Rozemyne trusts Gil so much that she made him her representative anyway, right?" I asked. "As her guard knight, I want to earn that much trust myself. That's why I want you to tell me what he did."

Gil was listening with wide eyes, then he broke into a grin and puffed out his chest. "I don't know if this will be of any use to you, since I don't do the work of an honorable knight, but I simply strove to not fall behind anyone else in the workshop," he said. "I wanted to do the most and the best work—to make Lady Rozemyne's wish of spreading the printing industry throughout the duchy come true. At the time, I knew how to make every kind of paper in Ehrenfest, and I taught others how to do the same. That's why Lady Rozemyne trusted me to go to other provinces and spread my knowledge of printing and paper-making."

Gil seemed to dazzle like the sun as he clearly spoke about his hard work and dreams. I started to wonder whether I could puff out my chest like him when it came to my guard work... but that thought was depressingly short lived when I remembered my tragic blunder earlier that day.

"Erm... I do not know what you are concerned about, Lady

Angelica, but everyone has their strong points," Gil continued. "Lady Rozemyne said we can all use our particular strengths to be useful, which is why I am putting my all into my workshop duties. Our work isn't confined to the High Bishop's chambers."

He gave me a dazzling smile and then took his leave, having finished bringing in the water we needed. I chewed over his words as Nicola urged me into the bath.

I'm not even being useful as a guard, which is supposed to be my strength, so what should I do?

I couldn't do paperwork, and I had already failed as a guard knight. The only thing I could do at this point was get along with the temple attendants like Lady Rozemyne had asked me to.

"Nicola!" I said. "Please be my friend!"

"What? What?!" she exclaimed, looking concerned as she prepared to wash my hair.

"Lady Rozemyne requested it. She said she wants me to be friends with her temple attendants, since we all serve the same person. If you'll be my friend, Nicola, then I can at least say I'm being of some use to her."

Nicola blinked several times before giving me a smile. She seemed to smile all the time, but this was different—it was an expression of genuine emotion, which you almost never saw when living as a noble.

"We are very glad that you wish to be friends with us, Lady Angelica," she said. The people of the temple hadn't been raised to hide their emotions like us nobles. We looked the same on the outside, but I could tell we lived in completely different worlds. Nicola was weird to me, but at the same time, I enjoyed that weirdness very, very much. Maybe it was because seeing her smile made me so happy. Most people looked at me critically because of my inability to study or with concern whenever I demonstrated a clear lack of something... but almost nobody ever smiled at me.

"I'm glad that you're glad, Nicola. I'm a failure of a knight. I can't do guard work like the other guard knights in the temple, something I made more than clear today when I neglected my duties. I'm hoping that I can make up for it in at least some small part by making friends with you all."

"Ah, I see," Nicola said. "You're a bit depressed after messing up today. Well, don't worry. Lady Rozemyne is never cruel to those who make mistakes. You just need to make sure that you don't repeat it." She then tried to reassure me by describing her own mistakes as she washed my hair. Her fingers were so thorough and gentle that it was almost as relaxing as having someone pat my head.

"One thing that always cheers me up is eating tasty sweets while talking about happy things with Ella," Nicola continued. "I'll sneak some sweets to you later. We can keep it a secret from Lady Rozemyne."

Her way of consoling me was shockingly different from that of the attendants at home, but her genuine wish to cheer me up came through anyway. I could feel my eyes growing warm. Now I really understood why Lady Rozemyne preferred staying in the temple instead of the castle, even after being adopted by the archduke.

After my bath, Nicola really did bring me a plate of sweets. She swiftly poured me some tea as well, and things ended up feeling a little bit like a tea party.

"I can't say I really understand what the work of a guard knight is like," Nicola said, "but I might be able to relate with the paperwork. I mainly help in the kitchen these days, but I used to provide some assistance in the High Priest's chambers as an attendant. I was something of an expert when it came to nodding and agreeing that the High Priest was scary or asking for permission to cook instead, since I wasn't the best at paperwork."

She confidently thumped a fist against her chest, which made me smile too. It was hard for us to properly talk while she was standing behind me as a server, so I suggested that she take a seat and join me in eating sweets. It was fine, since this was all being kept under wraps anyway.

"Is it okay for me to sit?" she asked. "I won't get a scolding later, will I?"

"The sweets are already a secret, aren't they?"

"They are, but... Ngh. Excuse me!"

Nicola looked extremely hesitant as she sat in front of me, but the moment she picked up a sweet, she broke into a happy smile. Her nervousness from a moment ago had somehow vanished.

Mm... I think I understand why Lieseleta loves to feed shumils now.

"So, Nicola... You're not good at paperwork either?" I asked.

"I'm not terrible at it—well, unless you compare me to Monika. I struggle more with being in the High Priest's chambers. It's so quiet, and we all spend so long scratching away at paper... Doesn't it make you want to talk? It always feels so suffocating in there."

Nicola went on to explain that these feelings had resulted in her spending more time working in the kitchen as Ella's assistant. Now, she avoided going to the High Priest's chambers by saying that she needed to help prepare lunch.

"I may be avoiding the High Priest's chambers," Nicola continued, "but I've been working hard to make lunch, so I wouldn't say I've been slacking. Maybe you could find a way to avoid the High Priest's chambers too?"

"As much as I commend your idea of running away from the things you don't like, my duty here is to guard Lady Rozemyne. I can't leave my lady's side."

"Ah. That makes this more complicated..."

We contemplated the situation for a while... and then there was a sudden knock at the door. "My sincerest apologies for interrupting your sleep, Lady Angelica," came Monika's voice as she entered the room with a modest expression. "Nicola has yet to return, even though Lady Rozemyne has now gone to sleep."

Nicola rushed to swallow her mouthful of sweets and stood up, but it was too late. Monika had seen everything.

"Nicola, what in the world are you doing?!" Monika barked, her eyebrows shooting up. I recognized that look at once, since people in the temple were a lot easier to read than nobles. Nicola was going to receive a very long lecture, I was sure.

"Is something the matter, Monika?" came Fran's voice from somewhere outside the room. "Has Nicola done something to Lady Angelica?" He couldn't just step inside, since he was a man, but he had come with Monika to check up on us.

Nicola had turned ghostly white and was shaking like a leaf, while Monika was looking far from pleased. "Nicola," she said, "it is unthinkable for an attendant to sit with a noble such as—"

"Monika, the scolding can wait," Fran said. "Have her leave the room at once."

"My apologies, Lady Angelica. We will take Nicola away for you," Monika said, having been snapped back to her senses by Fran's warning. She then moved to grab the seated girl, who was surely in for the rebuking of a lifetime. I couldn't allow that to happen, especially when she had gone to such lengths to comfort me.

"Monika, Fran... It's fine," I explained. "I was consulting her about something. Do not scold her."

In an instant, Monika's polite smile morphed into a look of suspicion. Her eyes moved between Nicola and me, and then, with a serious expression, she said, "Consulting Nicola about what...? She usually cheers people on rather than doing things herself, but was she being helpful to you somehow?"

"Yes, very. And if possible, I wish to consult you and Fran as well. Do come in."

Monika and Fran exchanged troubled glances and then came over, having no room to refuse me. "So, what were you consulting her about...?" Monika asked. "Is there some problem with the temple accommodation?"

"Nicola, explain for me."

People usually told me I was too brief and unclear, which made me hard to understand, so I decided to leave the explanation to Nicola and picked up my cup. My work here was done. It would be harder for Fran and Monika to scold Nicola now that they were so involved themselves.

"The truth is, I didn't really have a good answer, but... Lady Angelica wants to help Lady Rozemyne as much as she can," Nicola began. "The problem is, she doesn't have a knack for paperwork. What should she do?"

Monika and Fran knew what had happened in the High Priest's chambers, and they paused for a moment in consideration. Nicola watched them, then discreetly mouthed "Now they won't get mad" to me. I gave a small nod in response, holding back the urge to smile. Sometimes, the training I received to hide my emotions actually came in useful.

"I see... If you consider yourself poor at paperwork, Lady Angelica, perhaps you could increase your workload in other areas?" Monika suggested, offering a serious answer despite being so taken aback about the sudden invitation into my room.

"Other jobs? Like what?" I asked, leaning forward. The idea of doing something other than paperwork was like a shining ray of hope.

"Perhaps you could learn the sounds of the bells and use that knowledge to guard the door *and* receive guests," she said. It was true that those who guarded doors needed to have a firm grasp on these signals to effectively carry out their duty.

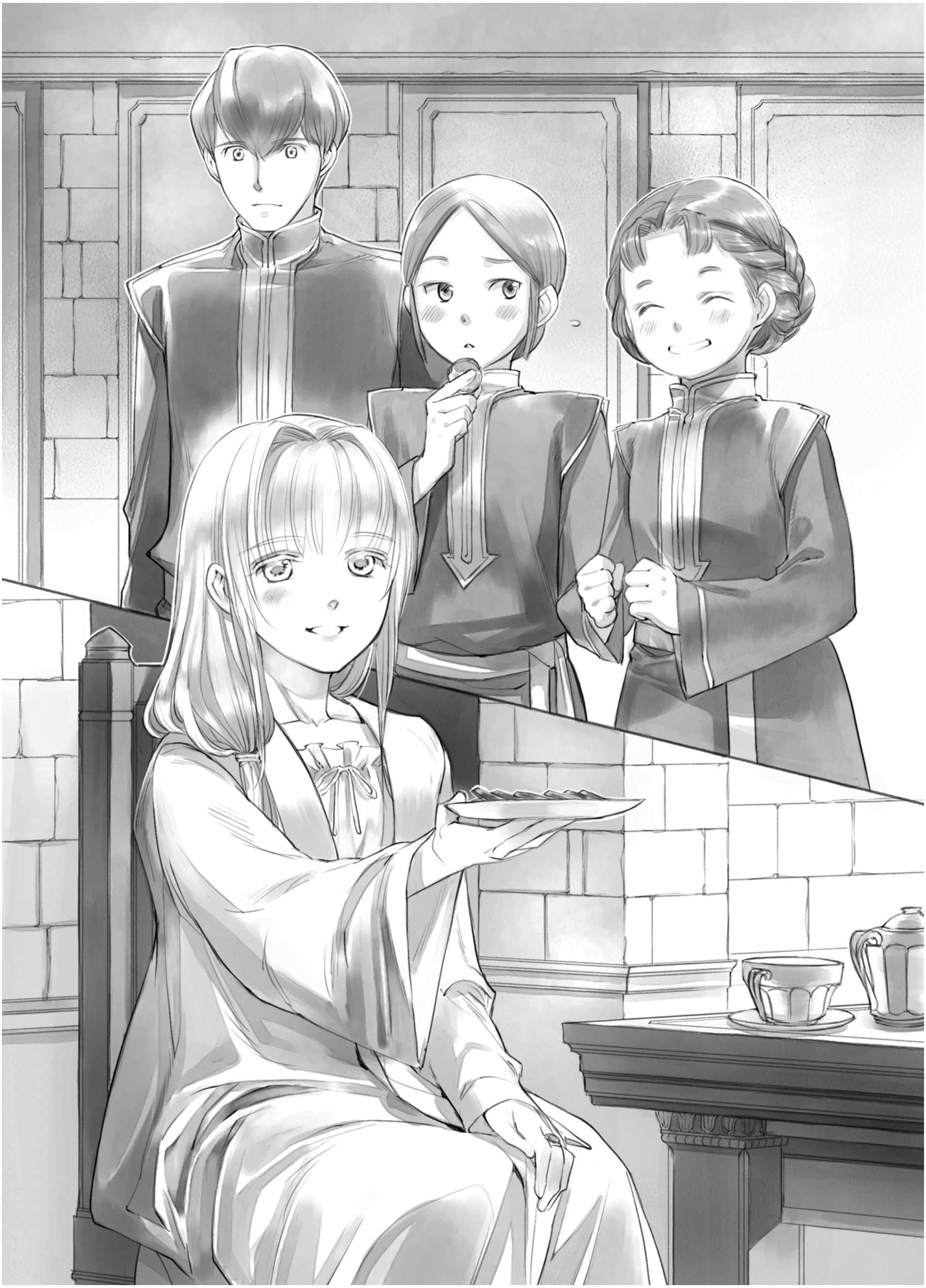
"But there was a gray priest by the High Priest's door who received the guests last time," I noted. "Won't I be stealing his job?"

"If you learn to receive guests, Lady Angelica, then that gray priest will be able to focus on assisting Lord Ferdinand," Monika replied. She went on to explain that, by allowing the others to work without interruption, I would be helping them make progress without doing any paperwork of my own. The shining ray had turned into a radiant beam; I *could* help after all.

"That is an amazing idea, Monika," I said. "As a reward, I offer you this sweet."

"Lady Angelica, this is..."

Accepting this sweet would make her an accomplice in full, thereby making it impossible for her to lecture Nicola for the same misdeed. Monika glared at Nicola, then accepted the sweet from me and ate it.



Now for Fran.

I glanced over at him, but he shook his head with a bemused smile and said there was no need, as he had no intention of scolding Nicola. Once that was settled, he then said, "You are concerned about not being skilled with paperwork, Lady Angelica, but guard knights are not meant to do paperwork in the first place. Much, much work has accumulated due to Lady Rozemyne spending two years in the jureve, and the High Priest is busily working through it, but such work is by no means your responsibility."

"Really?" I asked, tilting my head. "But both Damuel and Lord Eckhart were doing it..." This had made me think that all guard knights in the temple needed to do paperwork, but apparently not.

"Do you know that Lord Damuel started visiting the temple as part of a punishment?"

"Yes. Well, that was when he was demoted to an apprentice," I replied with a vague smile. His circumstances had been explained to me before I came here, but I wasn't sure of the details. I was told I only needed to remember that his demotion had followed an incident during a trombe hunt, and that he had ended up guarding Lady Rozemyne.

"The current paperwork situation began when the High Priest said that Lord Damuel could earn more money by assisting him with his work," Fran explained. "As for Lord Eckhart, he is working hard to secure even a little more free time for the High Priest, considering this his duty as a retainer, but it is still something he has taken on by choice."

I could feel the tension leave my body all at once. According to Fran, I wasn't obligated to do paperwork after all.

"The High Priest wanted to make the idea of nobles working in the temple more acceptable when the scholars overseeing the printing industry started to visit," Fran continued, "but he certainly doesn't consider it necessary work for a guard knight."

"So I really don't need to do paperwork, then?"

"That's correct, my lady. In fact, the High Priest will even be grateful if you, as a guard, simply learn to distinguish the bells that blue priests use. It cannot be said that there are no dangerous blue priests."

His words put me on guard. The temple seemed much more peaceful than noble society, but even here, it seemed there were enemies. It was my duty as Lady Rozemyne's guard knight to keep them away.

"I will speak to Zahm about teaching you the bells tomorrow," Fran said, bringing our conversation to a close. "It is late, and I humbly suggest that we all go to bed."

"Okay. I thank you ever so much, Fran."

Fran and Monika ordered Nicola to clear away the tea as punishment for eating sweets during work, then left. Nicola, relieved to have not been scolded any further than that, let out a big sigh. She then smiled and quickly started gathering the cups together.

"I'm glad they solved your problem, Lady Angelica."

"It's all thanks to you, Nicola. I thank you ever so much."

"Aha... You claimed you were a failure of a guard knight, but Fran thinks it's tremendously helpful that you're being so open to temple traditions and not making a huge fuss of things. We attendants are all so glad that you were the one to come here, Lady Angelica. Well... good night!"

They're glad it was me?

I watched Nicola leave, in a daze. That was maybe the first time anyone had said they were pleased to have my company in particular.

That night, as I climbed into bed, there was a pleasant warmth in my chest. Despite all of my failures, it had been a very good day overall. Life in the temple seemed like it was going to be fun.

Judithe — A Guard Knight Always Left Behind

“Would you like some tea, Judithe?” Philine asked, as she always did when I came out from having my bath. It was her attendant Isberga who started preparing it for me, while my attendant Frederika got the bath ready for Philine. We could share our attendants like this because we were sharing a room, and this arrangement lessened the burden on them both. Archnoble attendants had their own rooms and could freely purchase the services of others, but mednobles and laynobles didn’t have the money to live that lavishly.

“Mm-hmm. Thanks,” I said, sitting down. Isberga poured us both tea, then I waited for Philine to take the first sip. I didn’t have the slightest suspicion that they were trying to poison me, but skipping noble etiquette wasn’t an option.

My eyes wandered to a stack of papers she had moved onto the nearby bookcase to make room for the tea. “Have you been gathering new stories again?” I asked.

Philine nodded in response. “They won’t receive payment until next year, but still, crest-certified work is such a boon.”

The work that Lady Rozemyne had requested wouldn’t be checked until we returned to Ehrenfest, so it wasn’t suitable for those who needed money immediately. That said, she provided all the necessary ink and paper, meaning anyone who could write was guaranteed to make a profit. It was especially popular with younger students, who could do little other work.

“Because of you, I can feel comfortable talking to people from other duchies,” Philine said. “I thank you ever so much for accompanying me to the library so often.”

“I’m not sure I deserve any credit...” I mumbled. “I spend all of my time there studying.”

“But you go out of your way to put on light armor when accompanying me. It’s very heartening.”

Philine had gotten used to going to the library with Lady Rozemyne's group, but when Lady Rozemyne returned to Ehrenfest, that ceased to be an option. It was too risky for Philine to go alone, especially considering that she was a laynoble—there was a chance that she might attract unwanted attention from envious students or be strong-armed into undesirable situations by those who looked down on her. That was why Hartmut and Brunhilde had asked me to accompany her as a guard.

I am getting paid for this, after all. It's a valuable source of income for me.

It was Lady Rozemyne's will that her retainers' safety was ensured, which was great for me; I was so swamped with studying that I hadn't been able to earn any money or even carry out my duties as a guard knight, but this solved all of my problems. It was a little hard to focus on my schoolwork while wearing light armor, but the situation was so favorable that I was willing to endure it.

"So, what story did you gather today?" I asked.

"One about a feybeast hunt passed down in Berschmann. You could technically call it a knight story, but I think it's more accurate to call it a collection of documents about feybeast weaknesses."

"That sounds fun," I said. Knowing as many feybeast weaknesses as possible was crucial for being a strong knight. But before I could ask for more details, Frederika poked her head into the room.

"My apologies for the wait, Lady Philine."

Philine set down her cup and started out of the room with Isberga; it was her turn to take a bath. Once she was out of sight, I took out some review documents. I needed to prepare for tomorrow's classes.

"Your family must have been surprised when they learned about you becoming Lady Rozemyne's retainer, but I think they would be even more taken aback to see how hard you've been studying. Lord Theodore mentioned that he still struggles to believe it," Frederika said, giggling as she prepared my bed.

I pursed my lips and continued glaring at my documents. "Well, if Lady Rozemyne had woken up earlier, and I had been chosen sooner, I would have studied more in the summer and autumn." It had come as quite a shock when I found out that mednoble guard knights needed to attain such high grades, and now I was working extremely hard to meet those expectations.

“Perhaps this will serve as a reminder that you should work hard every single day so that you’re prepared for any situation that might occur,” Frederika remarked, referring to how I had prioritized knight training over studying in the past.

I continued to study while Frederika proceeded with her lecture; I needed to finish my lessons as soon as possible, since I wanted to participate in guard knight training too. As it stood, I wasn’t carrying out my duty enough for me to puff out my chest and say that I really was Lady Rozemyne’s guard knight. I needed to work hard so that I could impress my family with how far I had come.

Just as Frederika finished preparing my bed, tomorrow’s clothes, and some fresh tea, Philine returned from her bath. I paused my studying to offer her a seat and poison-test the tea, just as she had done for me earlier.

“You were invited to be Lady Charlotte’s guard knight in the playroom, weren’t you?” she asked. “Why did you instead wait for Lady Rozemyne to wake up?”

“My plan from the very beginning was to become a Kirnberger knight, so I didn’t think much about becoming a guard. But Angelica was Lord Bonifatius’s disciple and got more of his attention than anyone else, despite her being a medknight, remember? I really looked up to Angelica, since she was strong enough to surpass even archknights, so I decided that I would join her in serving Lady Rozemyne, if anyone.”

Though I was so surprised when I learned about Angelica’s true nature.

I chose to keep that last point to myself. I didn’t have any older siblings to receive information from, so I hadn’t found out until I was attending the Royal Academy myself, but Angelica was really bad at academics. This had come as a great shock to me, as I had very selfishly built her up in my mind as someone who could do anything. Now, however, I respected her even more. She was continuing as a guard knight despite having such poor grades that she needed remedial lessons, while at the same time being given special care and attention by Lord Bonifatius, who thought so highly of her.

Under any other circumstances, she’d either be relieved of duty after exasperating her lord or lady, or be forced to resign by her family before she brought any more shame upon them.

"What kind of place is Kirnberger, anyway?" Philine asked, her grass-green eyes sparkling in anticipation of my answer. "I've never left the Noble's Quarter, so I would love to know."

I closed my eyes and thought back to my home province. "Kirnberger shares its name with a city with a country gate that was closed a long time ago. Our province's knights continue to guard it, as is our duty. My father is a knight who serves Giebe Kirnberger himself."

"And what is this gate like?"

"It's a sight to behold, and it shines with wondrous colors. You need to fly up above the border gate on your highbeast to see it, so only Kirnberger knights have the privilege. I didn't get to see it myself until after my first year in the Royal Academy, when I got my own highbeast." It was the most beautiful sight, and even now, I could remember how proud I had felt knowing that I was guarding it and the land. "Though I'll probably never get to see it again..."

"Why is that?"

"Now that I'm Lady Rozemyne's guard knight, I can't serve in Kirnberger, can I? And once we guard knights go back to the castle, we'll be going into the dormitory and serving Lady Rozemyne there. I can't imagine I'll ever really have the chance to go back home."

Kirnberger was several days away by carriage. The journey could be reduced to a single day by highbeast, but I had never attempted it before, and I wasn't confident that I could manage it without getting lost.

"Oh, Judithe..." Philine said, her eyes brimming with concern.

I smiled. "I'm not upset about it; this is what I wanted, after all. My real complaint is that I'm up to my neck in papers studying to get the grades I need, and I barely ever get to do guard duty for Lady Rozemyne!"

Going so long without practical experience was a surefire way to dull one's skills, but Leonore kept saying that I needed to focus on my studies and wouldn't let me train with the others. I was a second-year, so my classes were all part of the shared introductory courses; the most we got to do was make weapons with our schtappes. It wouldn't be until my third year, when I took up the knight course, that my practical lessons would start to incorporate training.

"Gahhh. I wanna train..." I moaned. "Everyone was so worried about whether Angelica would pass, but Lady Rozemyne made it happen like it was nothing and then took Angelica with her. She must think I'm even worse at these things in comparison...”

“She would never think that of you. Angelica only scraped by in her classes, while you are scoring such high grades. To be honest with you, I made it through history and geography by the skin of my teeth. *I'm* the one people think is incompetent.”

Her low grades were due to Lady Rozemyne's rampage. As a laynoble turned archducal retainer, Philine could have minimized the envy she was having to endure by securing very high grades in her exams, but she had been more or less forced to prioritize speed above all else. I could only smile at her sympathetically.

“Your written classes might have been a struggle, but at least you've finished them now,” I said. “I wish Lady Rozemyne had made textbooks for us too.”

“She put some together for us covering second-year material so that we can prepare for the year ahead. Would you like to see them?”

“Yes, please!”

And so, Philine allowed me to borrow her guides covering second-year material. I started looking for the subjects I hadn't passed yet, and my eyes widened despite myself. Everything was organized so neatly.

“Lady Rozemyne could get better grades in my classes than me right now,” I said. “There's no doubt in my mind about it.”

“Even right after she was baptized, she was always alone in the winter playroom reading some thick, complicated-looking book. She's actually the person who taught me to read and write stories. She was my professor from the day we met,” Philine said with a nostalgic smile.

I thought back to when I was eight and in the playroom with Lady Rozemyne. The toys she had brought to serve as educational tools were phenomenal, and I had put my absolute all into winning the games she hosted so that I could get her sweets.

“I remember Lady Rozemyne even giving instructions to Professor Moritz,” I said. “She was more of a professor than the professor himself, wasn't she? It's just, I was having so much fun with the new playing cards and such that I barely remember Lady Rozemyne focusing on her reading...”

Back then, I was so focused on playing that Lady Rozemyne's pastimes hadn't even caught my attention; I couldn't remember what she had been up to in the slightest. I had also spent a lot of my time running around the knights' training grounds, while Lady Rozemyne had to sit out due to her poor health. We had essentially been living in different worlds.

Philine looked somewhat bashful. "She allowed me to read books and preserved my mother's stories in writing. It made me so overjoyed that I did nothing but look at her in the playroom," she said.

Oh, right... Now that she mentions it, it was in the playroom that Philine swore loyalty to Lady Rozemyne.

"Have you almost finished your classes too, Philine?"

"No, unfortunately. My lack of mana means I'm still struggling with my practical lessons. To think that even maintaining a schtappe has been so hard for me..."

"It took me a while to form my first one, but I never felt like I was using mana to maintain it. Maybe it just takes practice."

"I think that can be explained by our different statuses. At times like this, I am always reminded why laynobles are so rarely chosen to serve the archducal family as retainers."

She was right—those who didn't have much mana were much less able to protect their lord or lady in an emergency and wouldn't be able to maintain magic tools properly either.

"Lady Rozemyne said that she needs me for my talent and passion for gathering stories, not my mana," Philine continued, "but I don't want to bring shame to the archducal family. I would very much like to learn her compression method, as Damuel did, to increase my mana as much as possible."

Damuel was a guard knight who had been serving Lady Rozemyne longer than anyone. He was a laynoble, but after learning the mana compression method, he had apparently increased his capacity to the level of a mednoble. I struggled to believe it, but apparently it was true.

"I want to practice more with my ranged weapons, since Lady Rozemyne praised my skill with them," I said. "Like you, I also want to increase my mana capacity as much as I can. My hope is to start using mana arrows like the archnobles do, but as I am now, I wouldn't be able to endure for long enough."

With enough mana, I could even take after Angelica and grow a manablade. Doing that meant I wouldn't need to prepare as many weapons and tools for combat. Mana capacity was essential when it came to fighting as a knight.

"Not to mention, at this point, I might actually have *less* mana than Damuel," I noted. "Considering that he's of a lower status than me, this is a *huge* problem."

"I don't think you should compare yourself to an adult when you're still only a second-year, Judithe. Well, either way, Lady Rozemyne would certainly say that working hard is a good thing. I am also working hard in my efforts to gather stories, which I am sure she will praise."

Thus, we both resolved to chase after our respective goals.

It was only a few days later that I managed to finish the last of my classes. As a retainer serving the archducal family, my grades were only a little higher than average, but my scores in every subject had improved from the year before. They were also quite impressive compared to those of other mednobles, in my opinion.

But grades can come later. Right now, what matters is that I can finally participate in training!

"Passed all your classes, huh? Congratulations," Hartmut said when I returned to the dormitory. "Leonore took all the knights to the training grounds. Why not take this opportunity to join them?"

Seeing absolutely no reason to refuse him, I gleefully bounded out of the dormitory and rushed to the training grounds. Little did I know that an even greater hell than my time spent studying awaited me.

"Leonore, let me train too!"

But what happened next was something I wished to purge from my memories forevermore.

Hartmut — Dunkelfelger Women

No sooner had the ordonnanz from Rihyarda arrived than I rushed out of the dormitory; a ditter match between Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger was apparently being held to decide the ownership of two library magic tools. I guessed that not a single person expected our duchy to win... but in the end, Lady Rozemyne managed to achieve the impossible. Even as her greatest supporter, this outcome took me by surprise.

Spectacular...

Friend and foe alike had cried out in awe and excitement at the slew of devious plots employed against Dunkelfelger. I, too, had gotten caught up in the atmosphere and cried out in glee at my lady's efforts, while on the inside cursing our duchy's apprentice knights for being so incompetent and dragging her down. My elation disappeared in an instant, however, when I saw Lord Lestilaut's reaction to his defeat.

"Your foul plots were despicable! You are no saint!"

They were the barks of a sore loser, but he was still an archduke candidate from the second-ranked duchy. It was impossible to say how this event would impact things moving forward. Lady Rozemyne didn't seem at all worried—in fact, she seemed rather glad that someone was "recognizing the truth"—but that was because she didn't understand the gravity of the situation.

Well... I have no choice. I'll need to put even more effort into promulgating her sainthood now.

Her silky, flowing hair the color of the night sky was the loving work of the God of Darkness, and her golden eyes had been blessed by the Goddess of Light herself. These colors reflected Lady Rozemyne better than anything. She looked a great deal younger than her peers due to her two-year slumber, but even so, her heart overflowed with Heilschmerz's compassion. On top of that, her seemingly infinite stream of discoveries and inventions proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was loved by Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom.

Lady Rozemyne had been blessed by so many gods that she had a considerable amount of mana, and one had to acknowledge that her blessings were the most powerful and most divine in all of Yurgenschmidt. The gods had put her in Ehrenfest so that she might meet me, and they had graciously done this at a time when we could attend the Royal Academy together. Our meeting was the very definition of a miracle!

"Hartmut, we are eating at the moment," Brunhilde said, interrupting my thoughts. "If you intend to offer prayers to the gods, return to your room and do it there."

I relented and resumed eating. It was the height of socializing season, but the archduke had ordered Lady Rozemyne to return to Ehrenfest. As an apprentice scholar, I couldn't accompany her, even though I had finished my classes. I was deathly envious of guard knights and resented my own inadequacies beyond words. To be honest, I never expected that Lady Rozemyne's presence alone could breathe new life into my dull existence, and in turn, that her absence alone would plunge me back into the despair of monotony.

Lady Rozemyne truly is the saint who gives my world color.

"Philine, do you not find these days without our lady to be entirely fruitless?" I asked. "It feels as though a thick blanket of gray has enveloped the world."

"I certainly do find myself missing Lady Rozemyne..." Philine said, but her forlorn expression soon turned into a smile. "I'm fine, though, since there's still much I need to do for her. She has finally awoken from her long sleep, and while that alone was wondrous enough, she even took me into her service. Rather than regretting her absence, I intend to be of use to her—to gather stories and transcribe as many books as I can."

The look in her eyes as she marched toward her goal was nothing short of gladdening. I had initially been surprised to hear about an apprentice layscholar being taken as a retainer, but I could understand what Lady Rozemyne saw in her.

Indeed. Lady Rozemyne's acumen never fails to impress.

That said, it was also true that Philine was lacking in many areas for a retainer of the archducal family. It was my duty as an apprentice archscholar to guide her such that her shortcomings wouldn't inconvenience Lady Rozemyne.

I'll take her to scholar gatherings so that she can start meeting others and teach her how to buy and gather information...

As I formed my training regimen in my head, Brunhilde got her attendant to brew and serve some post-meal tea. I accepted a cup and sipped my beverage.

"On a more important note, Hartmut, might I ask you to accompany me to tomorrow's tea party?" Brunhilde asked. She was enthusiastic about these gatherings, describing them as essential opportunities to spread Lady Rozemyne's trends, but I wasn't too into them myself. Of course, had Lady Rozemyne been here, I would have assisted her with every fiber of my being—but I didn't see the point of attending with Lord Wilfried in her absence.

This can wait until Lady Rozemyne comes back, or even until next year. There's no need for us to bother with it right now.

Lady Rozemyne had already received a hairpin order from royalty, and Klassenberg's archduke candidate was probing her about rinsham. Ehrenfest already had the attention of most girls, and that wouldn't change whether he socialized or not. The only problem would be that other duchies would think poorly of him for being secretive if he didn't socialize. In my opinion, it was better for us to wait and have Lady Rozemyne spearhead the spreading of trends instead.

Those aren't Ehrenfest's trends to begin with. Lady Rozemyne created them all on her own.

To be honest, I found it repulsive that Lord Wilfried could even be considered an archduke candidate next to Lady Rozemyne. I had no intention of aiding him when he was using us to spread trends that weren't his own.

Soon after his baptism, Lord Wilfried earned a reputation among the Leisegangs as a wholly incompetent archduke candidate who could act without restraint because of his doting grandmother Lady Veronica. Once these rumors were verified, the Leisegangs began plotting. They would use his winter debut to demonstrate his grave flaws and encourage Lady Charlotte, who was being educated by the far more competent Lady Florencia, to challenge his claim to becoming the next aub. After this, they would use his inevitably terrible grades at the Royal Academy to publicly denounce him, criticize Lady Veronica, and ultimately remove her from her seat of power. In short: Lord Wilfried was nothing more than a perfect fool to be exploited to besmirch his grandmother's name.

In the end, however, Lady Veronica's displacement hadn't been related to Lord Wilfried. His lackluster education was made up for by Lady Rozemyne, he was saved from disinheritance during the Ivory Tower incident, and now he stood above all others as though his superiority as an archduke candidate were obvious. I was moved by Lady Rozemyne's compassion, but that did not change my opinion that her brother was tragically unsuited to his role.

I won't actively work against him, since Lady Rozemyne went to such extreme lengths to save him. Of course, I'd really rather eliminate him here and now just to get it over with, but the incident with Traugott has well and truly proven the danger of angering Lady Rozemyne. Keeping my distance is the safest move, as unfortunate as that is.

"You know more about Lady Rozemyne's trends than anyone, Brunhilde, and Lord Wilfried has his own retainers," I said. "Although I agree that having me join you is the best course of action for gathering information, the tea party is for girls; I strongly believe it would be better to have Philine go with you instead so that she can gain some experience."

I would consider it unforgivable for Philine to slip up during one of Lady Rozemyne's tea parties... but in this case, seeing as it was Lord Wilfried attending instead, I was willing to accept that mistakes sometimes happened in the path to improvement.

"Not to mention," I continued, "rather than introducing another boy to this tea party, would it not be more advisable to have a girl participate and offer up advice?"

Brunhilde lowered her eyes, seeming to understand my complete unwillingness to participate in the tea party. "You may have a point," she said. "Philine, I ask you to accompany us."

"U-Understood," Philine replied, unable to keep her voice from cracking. She was clearly anxious, so I attempted to ease her nerves, adopting the kindest tone I could manage so that she would trust me as her instructor.

"Philine, leave the bulk of the work to Lord Wilfried's retainers. If you make your presence known more than is necessary, they may ostracize you for being an apprentice layscholar. Keep your distance, observe the atmosphere, focus on what kind of conversations are being had, and ensure that you can report everything to Lady Rozemyne."

"I thank you ever so much for this essential advice," she replied. "I am feeling more hopeful now."

Philine, never lose that honest heart of yours. Lady Rozemyne needs at least one person like you by her side.

Truth be told, information would flow to us regardless of whether Lord Wilfried attended these tea parties at all. After the ditter game between our duchies, Dunkelfelger's apprentice scholars had started inviting us to meetings, offering us far more opportunities to gather intelligence on top-ranking duchies than before. And now that the prince had given his approval for Ehrenfest to continue maintaining the library magic tools, there were several apprentice scholars from other top-ranking duchies approaching us as well.

To think that Lady Rozemyne could establish so many talking points in the short period prior to socializing season. She never fails to astound.

How much information one could obtain from scholar gatherings largely depended on where one's duchy was ranked. Some information was shared only among top-ranking duchies, some trickled down to the occasional middle-ranking duchy, some was shared freely among middle-ranking duchies, and some was passed from the middle-ranking to bottom-ranking duchies. How high in this chain one could climb determined one's talent as a scholar. Ehrenfest was invited to some gatherings with other middle-ranking duchies but was generally stuck with bottom-ranking duchies and struggled immensely when it came to gathering information from the top.

It was crucial to remember the duchy rankings while trying to form personal relationships with classmates and striving to extract as much information from them as possible. And yet, Lady Rozemyne had disregarded convention entirely and easily managed to create situations to exchange information with apprentice scholars from top-ranking duchies. In fact, now, they came to us. Her sudden burst of progress had more or less trivialized the years I spent forming my own connections.

She's brought about such great change in a single year. How can anyone who's witnessed this not find themselves utterly starstruck?

As Lady Rozemyne's retainer, I was invited to a gathering of scholars from top-ranking duchies. Never before had this happened, and when I attended, it was a Drewanchel scholar who broke the ice.

"So, Lord Hartmut—when will Lady Rozemyne be returning to the Royal Academy? My lady dearly wishes to invite her to a tea party."

"She is so sickly that we originally feared she would need to delay her entry into the Royal Academy, so I would not expect her return until near the end of the term," I replied. "What does Drewanchel wish to learn at this tea party?"

"My lady is interested in the library magic tools. We have asked Professor Solange how the registration was done, but her answer was unclear."

Preparation was needed for topics to really blossom at tea parties. I smiled, making a mental note that Drewanchel was interested in the library magic tools as well as the current trends, and then said, "Lady Rozemyne became their master by the blessing of Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom."

"Er, I do not mean to speak in jest..."

"Oh, and neither do I. Lady Rozemyne prayed to Mestionora and granted a blessing, which subsequently gave life to Schwartz and Weiss. I saw it with my own eyes, but not even I can describe the divinity of the scene with words. Seeing her rejoice over the library registration and unleashing a blessing of the divine color of Wind erased all doubt as to why she is called a saint, and I could only—"

"I understand, Lord Hartmut. I will report as much to my lady."

My adulating speech was cut short, but that happened often. I did find this particular instance quite unfortunate, however, as Dunkelfelger's apprentice scholars would nod along in earnest as I praised Lady Rozemyne's ditter skills.

"There are rumors that Lady Rozemyne improvised a new song during her tea party with the professors," another scholar said.

"Ah, that is nothing to be surprised about; Lady Rozemyne has developed many new songs," I replied. "This is not where her true value lies, however."

"By which you mean to say...?"

The apprentice scholars leaned forward curiously, but I made sure not to give them what they wanted straight away. First, I obtained the information I wanted from them: how they felt about Ehrenfest, how they saw Lady Rozemyne and Lord Wilfried, what they thought about our new trends, and so on.

"So, what is this 'true value' you were referring to?" one of the scholars asked once my questioning was over. "Can she do more than compose songs?"

"Her greatest strength is her playing. Have you ever seen a blessing overflow to the tune of someone playing the harspiel?”

“Her playing...?”

“Indeed. Her fingers move so gracefully that all those watching are spellbound, and her youthful, dulcet tones offer sweet prayers to the gods. And then, in what can only be a loving response from the gods, blessings of vivid color shoot from her hands as she continues to play. This majestic sight alone is enough to see how much of a saint Lady Rozemyne truly is.”

The apprentice scholars exchanged glances as I continued to extol the beauty of the event. Their expressions indicated a complete lack of understanding, but it was only a matter of time before they came to realize the true splendor of my lady.

“I... I certainly would like to see such an event myself,” one of the scholars said. “Ah, my apologies, Lord Hartmut; there are classes I must attend. If you would excuse me.”

“Oh, before you go—Lady Rozemyne is very interested in the stories of other duchies and plans to purchase transcribed copies at a high price. We are spreading the word in the library as well, but please inform your apprentice layscholars.”

“Understood.”

The apprentice scholar made a quick retreat, but I wasn’t yet satisfied. *If only there was someone eager to share in my adoration of my lady. Even among Lady Rozemyne’s retainers, only Philine is willing to properly hear me out. It’s a miserable state of affairs.*

Lady Rozemyne’s sudden return home after barely attending classes had stimulated a lot of interest, and there were many who wished to know more about her. I extracted information from them one by one; even archnobles needed to earn their own money to learn Lady Rozemyne’s mana compression method.

While Philine was putting her all into transcribing books for Lady Rozemyne, I spent my already busy days marketing Ehrenfest paper in the library, warning any students who came too close to Schwartz and Weiss, and informing those of other duchies that we were willing to buy stories from them at a high price.

“Erm, Lord Hartmut,” said a third-year apprentice scholar not serving as anyone’s retainer, “I received questions from a Dunkelfelger apprentice scholar the other day about you and Lord Cornelius.”

I crossed my arms and urged her to continue; it had already come to my attention that there were apprentice scholars gathering intelligence on Lady Rozemyne's retainers and associates rather than on Lady Rozemyne herself, but I didn't know their objective. It seemed that whoever had approached this third-year was deftly avoiding me and gathering their information from other apprentice scholars. I would need to gather my own information from other apprentice scholars in the duchy.

"Were you questioned as well, Ignaz?" I asked.

"Yes, about Lady Rozemyne's retainers—particularly the archnobles," he replied. "The person in question is from the second-ranked duchy, so perhaps they are insistent on only forming connections with those of a high enough status."

His words gave me pause; those from Dunkelfelger concerned themselves with strength and ditter, not status. The moment Lady Rozemyne beat them, they had done a complete about-face and started seeking connections with her. Even now, their vocal praise for her was proving very useful. They were very interested in ditter-related information about Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand, and in their quest for knowledge, they were accepting intelligence from just about anyone.

Something about this didn't seem right. I decided to investigate the person making all these inquiries and found out she was an apprentice archscholar one year beneath me by the name of Clarissa. She wasn't serving an archduke candidate, meaning she was pretty much nothing to write home about.

It might be best for me to at least learn what her objective is before Lady Rozemyne returns.

But before I could even decide how best to approach Clarissa, she contacted me. We were to meet in a gazebo, as this was the perfect place to converse in secret without others noticing.

These are normally places for lovers to rendezvous, which does make me hesitant, but I'm probably overthinking it. She presumably doesn't have a partner in the first place, which means there isn't anyone who might misunderstand this.

It was with those thoughts in mind that I met up with Clarissa. She had brown hair that was braided behind her head and sparkling eyes that were the same blue as her cape. She seemed just as excited as the other Dunkelfelger students who were so eager to learn about Lady Rozemyne.

"Lord Hartmut," she said, "there is something we must discuss."

"I understand that you've been trying to find out about Lady Rozemyne's retainers. Now you want to know about Lady Rozemyne herself, I presume?"

"No," she said with a slight smile. "I want to know about *you*."

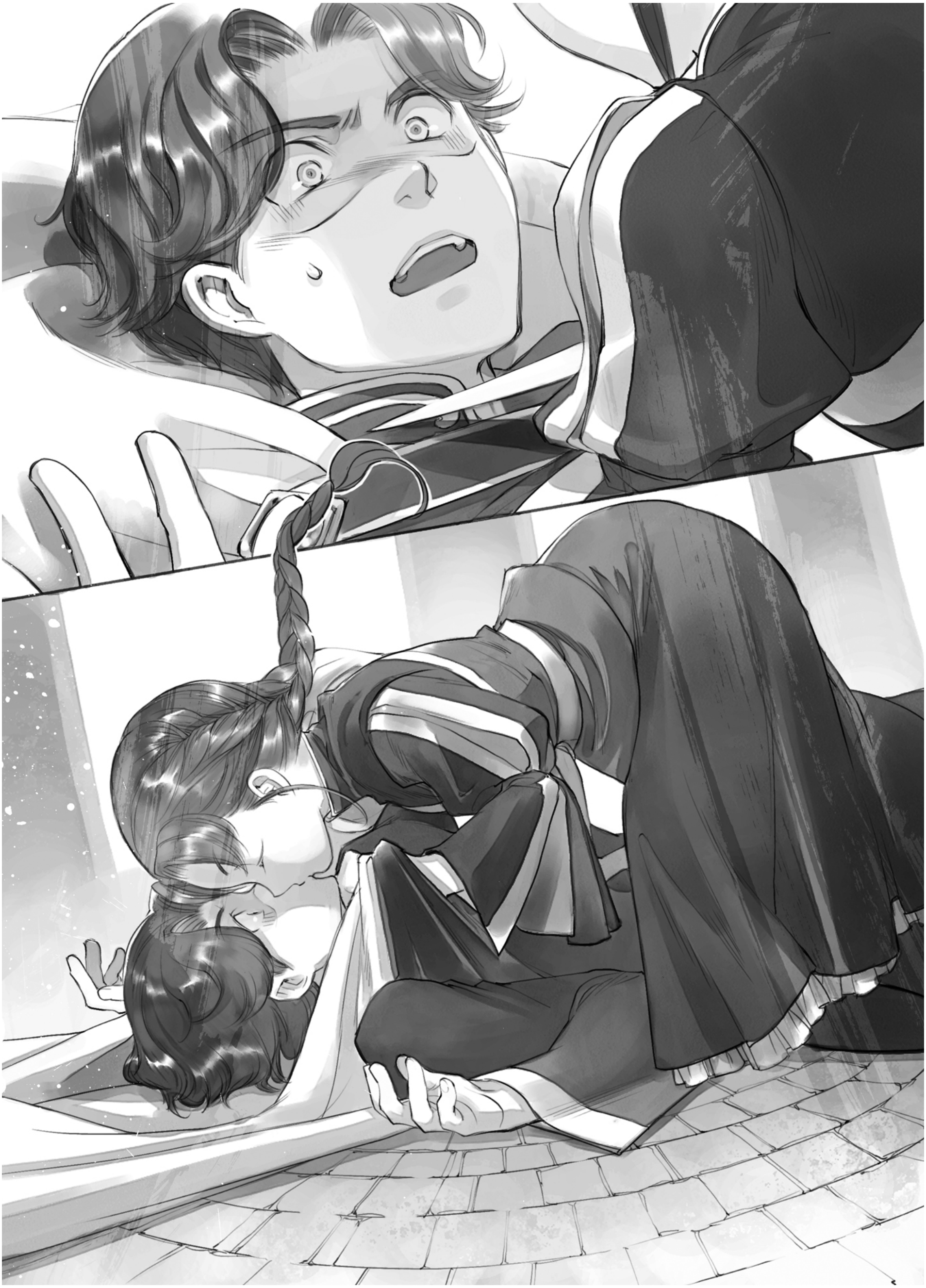
Excuse me...?

I was trying to wrap my head around the situation when I realized she had vanished. All of a sudden, something swept my legs out from under me, and a hand grabbed the breast of my shirt. I was met with the beastly blue eyes of a predator, and an instant later, the word "messer" was chanted right next to my ear.

My back hit the ground with some force, but I was yanked up a little before my head could do the same. Clarissa was straddling my torso, and the cold sensation against my neck could only be the blade of a knife. My blood froze in my veins; I didn't have the slightest idea what was happening. My experience with violent situations like this was slim to none, and not once had it crossed my mind that an apprentice scholar would hold me at knifepoint. I wouldn't even have expected such behavior from an apprentice knight.

"Wh-What do you th— Mm?!"

I tried to protest, but Clarissa suddenly pressed her lips against mine and started forcing her mana into me. The crackling sensation made me flail on instinct, but she didn't budge at all as she held me in place with her legs. All my struggling had earned me was a small cut where the blade was being held to my throat.



Clarissa pulled away and slowly licked her lips, no doubt trying to judge my mana. "Seems like you'll do," she said. "Good. Now, Lord Hartmut—give me proposal challenges."

"What?"

Proposal... challenges?

I gazed up at Clarissa, unsure what she was demanding of me. She must have sensed my confusion, as she began to explain how proposals worked in Dunkelfelger. Apparently, there was a tradition where girls could marry the men they had their eyes on by pinning them down with their own strength, demanding challenges, and then completing them. It was an interesting concept, and one that I was now very intimately aware of.

I can't believe such a weird proposal method would end up being used on me, of all people!

"I am absolutely dying to serve Lady Rozemyne," Clarissa said, "but unfortunately, I am an apprentice scholar of Dunkelfelger. This is a problem that I intend to solve."

One needed to be an Ehrenfest noble to serve Lady Rozemyne, and for an outsider, the fastest method to accomplish this was through marriage. Clarissa knew that Cornelius and I were the only two archnobles serving Lady Rozemyne who were of an appropriate age, and after Cornelius refused her advances, she had decided to focus her efforts on me. It was much easier to pin down an apprentice scholar than an apprentice knight, apparently.

"I don't have the time for an official proposal or color-mixing," she continued. "I expect more people to be targeting Lady Rozemyne's retainers soon, so I can't miss this opportunity. Marry me."

"I understand that these are pressing circumstances, but I don't know how I feel about you stealing a kiss like that," I said, doing my best to remain calm while trying to come up with a plan of escape. Unfortunately, my options were limited when Clarissa was pinning me down so firmly.

"Oh my, do you expect to tell others about this?" Clarissa asked. "About how a girl one year younger than you pinned you down, passionately forced herself on you, and even stole your lips? I expect your honor as a man would disappear in an instant." She giggled, not allowing her grip to loosen even for a moment, and then started to go on and on about how wondrous Lady Rozemyne was—all while we were still in this absurd position.

“I was truly moved,” she said. “So many in Dunkelfelger wish to become apprentice knights that we have our own selection exam to decide who should receive the privilege. It was my dream to join their ranks, but my small frame meant that I never stood a chance. That was why I was so taken aback when Lady Rozemyne, who is far smaller than I was at the time of my exam, managed to win at ditter—and using not strength, but wits! Do you know how moved I was to see her snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, despite her size? And then, as I found out more and more about her, my heart was won even more!”

The heated look in her eyes as she spoke about Lady Rozemyne was enough for me to confirm that the woman before me was exactly the comrade I was searching for. My heart raced just from being in the presence of someone who adored my lady as much as I did.

Not bad... Not bad at all.

I allowed Clarissa to continue her rant for quite some time, although I was distracted by the residue of her mana that lingered in my mouth. “I understand how you feel,” I said when she eventually reached a break in her speech, “but words mean very little on their own.”

“I am more than just talk. Give me a challenge so that I can prove it.”

She seemed unlikely to relent, so I contemplated what I might give her. It needed to be something founded in what I valued most in a wife.

That is, complete devotion to Lady Rozemyne. I want someone who’s as capable of extolling her virtues as I am.

“I have no intention of marrying someone who cannot bring happiness to Lady Rozemyne,” I said. “Prepare something that will please her before next term. Consider this an opportunity to prove both your talent for gathering information and your resolve to become her retainer. Show me what you are capable of.”

“That’s what I intend to do,” Clarissa replied with a smile. Her blue eyes gleamed with ambition, and only then did she dismiss her knife.

Now, what will she bring me, I wonder? I can’t wait to find out.

Wilfried — Male Socializing

Socializing season was underway, and my time was being spent attending one girls' tea party after another. The nightmare seemed to be going on forever, so when I received a gewinnen invitation from Lord Ortwin of Drewanchel, I almost jumped for joy. I read the letter again and again, excited to be socializing with another man at last, then ordered Isidore to pen a response confirming my attendance.

All my gewinnen practice has been for this day!

Gewinnen was a board game often played during male socializing. You used mana to control the pieces, and the aim was to steal your opponent's treasure—in essence, it was ditter on a board. I regularly practiced with my retainers so that I wouldn't embarrass myself against other duchies. It was a lot more enjoyable than harspiel practice or dedication whirling. Back in the winter playroom, I always lost to Rozemyne at karuta and playing cards, but I was confident that she'd never beat me in gewinnen.

"Up for a game, Ignaz?" I asked.

"I do not mind, but..." Ignaz glanced over at Oswald. Games of gewinnen took a while, so it was rarely played on days when my schedule was packed. It was normally reserved for snowy winter days when one couldn't go outside—which was part of why it was so popular in the Royal Academy.

"Oswald, I can't risk embarrassing myself against Drewanchel," I said, emphasizing that this was going to be my first time socializing. "I need practice."

He gave my request some thought and then said, "You have time for one game."

"In that case, Ignaz, get your pieces," I said. "Alexis, help Oswald prepare the board."

Those who played gewinnen usually had their own pieces, which they would bring with them and use for games. Many of these pieces were shaped after knights, and they were often very artistic. Part of the fun was seeing how your opponent had decided to customize them.

I'm pretty used to my retainers' pieces, so I'm looking forward to seeing what an archduke candidate from another duchy uses.

As I waited for Ignaz to come back, my head attendant Oswald and apprentice guard knight Alexis prepared my gewinnen board, which was ornately decorated, rectangular in shape, and exceptionally large. Since mana was used to play, the pieces and the board all incorporated feystones.

"I have returned," Ignaz said. He opened the box he was carrying and then held it out to me. "Shall we exchange pieces?"

I accepted my own box from Oswald, opened it, and then gave it to Ignaz in turn. We checked each other's pieces, making sure they didn't contain any mana from the last game.

"All good," I said.

"Lord Wilfried, this piece here isn't completely empty. You must be careful when playing against other duchies."

"There really isn't that much in there, but... I'll be careful."

I removed the offending piece from the box and pressed an empty feystone against it, removing the last vestiges of mana, then had Ignaz check it again. He gave his confirmation, at which point we took our places at the board, sitting across from each other.

"I suppose we're playing one-stone today?" Ignaz asked.

I nodded while removing the cover from the short end of the board, revealing five feystones that were used to make the game more complicated, and poured mana only into the first one. The more you filled, the more pieces you could use in the game, which allowed for more varied attack patterns. For this reason, we had to inspect the stones to make sure our opponent had only filled the agreed number with mana; once these checks were done, opening the cover again would result in an immediate disqualification.

"Ten pieces," I said to Ignaz while taking out that number from my box. The treasure piece was the first one I grabbed; the game was about stealing each other's treasure, so it was always used, no matter the difficulty.

But what else?

I needed to pick nine more. During one-stone games, players could use bow, sword, and spear pieces, and in any combination. This meant that choosing only bows was completely viable, but as pieces had different ranges of attack, it was generally not advised.

Filling more of the difficulty feystones gave you more mana to work with, which you could manually distribute to adjust the offensive power, defensive power, and speed of each piece. It also had other uses, such as allowing the employment of a scholar piece for setting traps or a support piece for carrying rejuvenation potions, thereby making the battle even more complex.

I've never used more than ten pieces before, but from what I've heard, Uncle's win rate against Father gets higher the more that are in play.

In the end, I picked three of each of the available pieces, placed them in my territory, and channeled mana into them. The pieces would glow once they were ready, and this interim period was when the players decided who would go first. I took a scholar and a support piece from among the ones still in my box, concealed them in separate hands, then held my fists out to Ignaz.

"Choose."

"Left, if you would."

I opened my left hand. Resting on my palm was the scholar piece, meaning that Ignaz would take his turn first.

All of our chosen pieces had started to shine, which meant it was time for our game to begin. Ignaz's finger hovered over the board as he looked up at me and said, "I shall make my move, then."

I spent the days leading up to my meeting with Lord Ortwin honing my gewinnen skills with my retainers. By this point, I could beat Ignaz pretty consistently, but I rarely ever won against Alexis. It frustrated me quite a bit.

"Isidore, am I forgetting anything?" I asked. "Oswald, is it safe to leave?"

"Wait until third bell," my head attendant replied. "The tea party room is not so far away."

I did as advised, feeling restless all the while, then headed out with my retainers to meet with Lord Ortwin. This was my first time socializing with other boys, so I was especially tense as I waited outside the numbered door.

"Welcome, Lord Wilfried," Lord Ortwin said as we were let into the room. I gazed around and noticed that there were two gewinnen boards prepared. Lord Dahvidh, an archduke candidate from Lindenthal wearing a bluish-green cape, and Lord Konradin, an archduke candidate from Gaussbuttel wearing a brown cape, were already in attendance. That meant all the first-year male archduke candidates were here.

"I see there are no students from the years above," I observed.

"Indeed, as they have not yet finished their classes," Lord Ortwin replied. "They have far more on their plates than we do, so they will not be participating until the latter half of the term. I held this gathering so that we first-years might adjust to the atmosphere of socializing before then."

"I see," I replied, nodding. He presumably knew this because Drewanchel had so many archduke candidates. Ehrenfest was the complete opposite, so I didn't know how many classes the older students had. Gathering some intelligence while I was here seemed wise.

"Third-years go hunting as well, no?" Lord Dahvidh said with a chuckle. "I am looking forward to that more than anything."

We first-years had just gotten our schtappes and learned to make highbeasts in class. Second-years were taught how to make feystone armor and turn their schtappes into weapons, and after finishing their classes, male archduke candidates of the third year and above could lead their guard knights on hunts. Lord Dahvidh seemed pretty well informed on the matter, so I paid close attention to his explanation.

"After you finish your second year, you'll start practicing hunting with your local Knight's Order," Lord Konradin noted. "I've wanted to start ever since I saw my half-brothers participating."

Talking to archduke candidates with older brothers was always very fruitful. Almost all of what I knew about male socializing had come from Father, but he wasn't telling me all that much anymore, since he was wary of the civil war having changed too much from when he was in the Royal Academy. I had consulted my retainers, but their response was that they struggled with archduke candidate things, so I needed to do this all myself.

Uncle might know more, but we're not close enough to talk about things like that.

To me, Uncle was the guy who loaded me with homework every time I saw him—or, to be more accurate, he only summoned me when he had work for me to do. Thankfully, Rozemyne was around to distract him from me. I wasn't sure what I would have done if she hadn't woken up from her jureve.

After sipping tea and exchanging information, it was time to play gewinnen. We decided that I would play against Lord Ortwin, while Lord Dahvidh and Lord Konradin would play each other. The matches started with us checking our opponents' pieces, and it was then that I noticed that Lord Ortwin's were all reddish-purple—aside from his treasure piece, which was light brown.

"I see your pieces are the same color as your hair and eyes, Lord Ortwin."

"Father ordered them for me, although it seems that they struggled to make them all the same color. Your pieces are..."

"The divine color of my birth season, rather than my eye color."

"I see. They are very finely crafted."

We chatted while checking each other's pieces one by one. This time, all of mine were completely drained of mana, meaning there was no cause for concern.

"Let us begin with a one-stone game," Lord Ortwin said. "This is our first time, after all."

"Will we do more later, then?" I asked.

Lord Ortwin nodded while channeling his mana into one of the difficulty feystones. "I am of the opinion that we should practice two-stone games before we start receiving invitations from older students," he said. "Some of them have a penchant for taunting others, you know. They will smugly ask if you have never played a game with more mana before."

Father had said that those in lower grades only needed to play one-stone games, since they weren't yet used to mana compression, but it seemed that I needed practice with more stones as well. It was crucial that I continue playing with my retainers after returning to my dormitory, otherwise I would end up struggling during the latter half of socializing season.

Lord Ortwin finished setting up his pieces before me, took an additional piece in each hand, and then held two closed fists in front of me. "So, Lord Wilfried—which one?"

"Right, if you would."

Lord Ortwin opened his right palm, revealing a support piece. I would go second in this game.

"I shall begin, then," he said, returning the two extra pieces to his box. He crossed his arms in thought, examining my side of the board, while I tried to guess how he would move by looking at his. Soon enough, his pieces flashed, and he commanded them to move by waving his fingers. Some of his sword and lance pieces moved one space forward, and with that, it was my turn to act.

First turns weren't all that important, as I understood it. I moved my pieces while considering several avenues of attack.

"I see you prefer to follow established openings, Lord Wilfried."

"Father says that I am not yet skilled enough to improvise—that I need to start with the basics. Putting too much focus on my attack and neglecting my defense often earns me a scolding."

The first time I practiced adjusting offense, defense, and speed, I put too much into my offense and not enough into my defense, which resulted in me getting destroyed by Father's fast bow pieces. This had annoyed me, but no sooner had I resolved to take down his pieces in turn than he stole my treasure.

Father creates all these weird strategies, but he says it's still too early for me to do the same.

"Oh, speaking of family—my older sister is interested in your duchy's hairpins," Lord Ortwin said, waving his left hand to move his pieces. I glanced up at him, then returned my eyes to the board to think of my next move.

"We are... quite pleased to have earned Lady Adolphine's attention."

I wonder why he's decided to talk about hairpins all of a sudden. Is he going to tell me to pick out the perfect one for Lady Adolphine?

I glared at my pieces, recalling all the similar requests that had been made of me during the flood of girls-only tea parties. To be honest, I wasn't good at picking out accessories for people. Not to mention, when I was little, Grandmother had always said, "Even when a woman asks your opinion, know that her heart is already set on something. She simply wants you to agree with her, so she will only be disappointed if you pick or compliment something other than her preference."

Let's not get too hasty here, Lord Ortwin. You're making a huge mistake. Picking things out for girls is a nightmare.

For now, I decided to say nothing unnecessary and instead focus on the game. I would respond only if Lord Ortwin made some suggestion or order that needed a response.

"Are you tired, by any chance?" Lord Ortwin asked, fixing me with a searching look after an extended period of silence. I didn't know where his question was coming from. Maybe I shouldn't have held my tongue for so long.

"Oh, no," I replied. "I am simply focusing on our game. Why do you ask?”

“I simply thought it strange that you did not take this opportunity to promote Ehrenfest’s new trends.”

Right, I see... This is a place to market what we have to offer.

The problem was, I didn’t know which trends to focus on; most of them were better suited to girls than boys. I didn’t use rinsham myself, and I couldn’t really say what was good about the hairpins. I wanted to leave all that to Rozemyne.

“Ah, that would be because Rozemyne has returned home,” I explained. “I have been invited to countless girls-only tea parties to speak on the same subjects. In truth, I would like for my sister to return to the Royal Academy soon.”

“Attending a girls’ tea party as the only boy does indeed sound exhausting. I am being made to attend gatherings with my older sister and her friends, and they always take a lot out of me,” Lord Ortwin admitted, his tone becoming one of exasperated annoyance as he revealed that he shared my suffering on a daily basis. I didn’t have to accompany Rozemyne on any socializing endeavors yet, but just imagining her dragging me to tea parties with Lady Eglantine or Lady Hannelore made the blood drain from my face.

“I thought I was used to tea parties after having so many with my grandmother, but it’s completely different from male socializing... I much prefer speaking with boys, as they do not ask about hairpins,” I replied, conveying that I didn’t want to be asked about accessories I didn’t even wear myself.

Lord Ortwin laughed, sounding both amused and sympathetic. “My older sister has asked me to choose accessories for her on many occasions in the past. She said the experience is necessary for when I gift a feystone necklace and cloth to my future partner, but all those she presented me with looked nearly identical.”

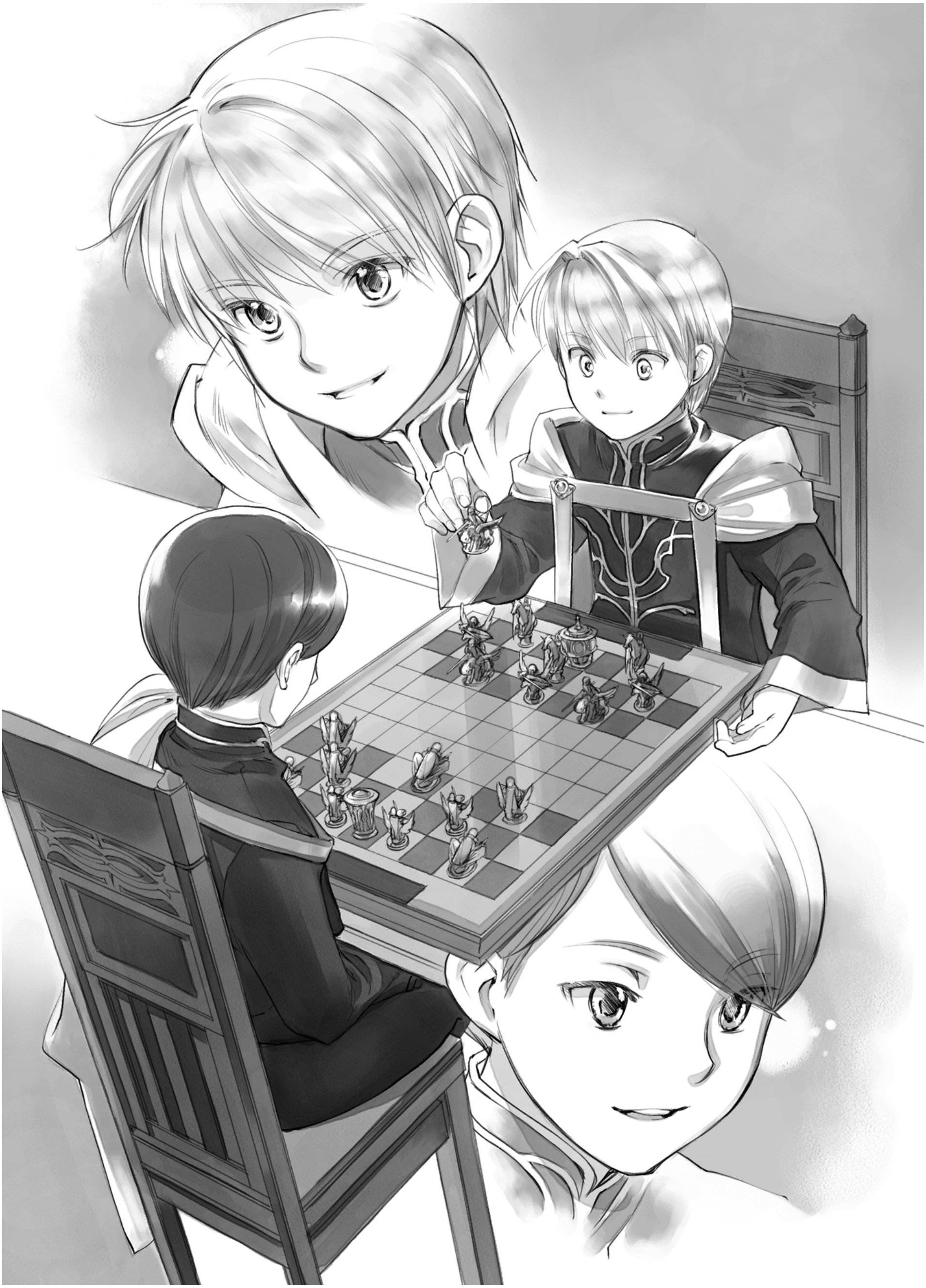
Exactly!

“Yes, the options that I’m given always seem so similar that I feel any would do,” I said. “What do girls see that we don’t?”

They said that even the slightest detail could result in a hairpin not matching their outfit, but I didn’t have a clue what they were talking about. If certain colors were going to stand out, why include them as choices in the first place? Voicing these thoughts was never an option, however, as Grandmother would start blabbing on for what felt like an eternity.

Lord Ortwin nodded along in enthusiastic agreement as I spoke.

I couldn’t believe it; he was a true brother-in-arms!



"You know what? I think we'll make good friends. Can I just call you 'Wilfried'?" Lord Ortwin asked, grinning as he moved his pieces. The same thoughts had been running through my mind.

"I would be honored. May I similarly address you as 'Ortwin'?"

"Sure. And you can drop the polite speech."

I had been playing it safe, since he was from a top-ranking duchy, but I now had his approval to speak normally. *"Ortwin," huh...?* I was overjoyed to have finally made my first friend in the Royal Academy.

"That was great," I said to myself. "Men belong at the gewinnen board, not at tea parties."

I felt amazing. Our game of gewinnen had ended in my defeat, but I now had a new friend and a goal to work toward—becoming skilled enough to beat him. I decided to drop as many tea parties from my schedule as possible so that I could dedicate myself to male socializing. Charlotte was going to be here next year, and my life would end up miserable with *two* little sisters dragging me to tea parties all the time. I would start by turning down such occasions this year, setting a precedent by which I could completely reject them next year.

Yep. It's a perfect plan.

Unfortunately for me, my plan wasn't as perfect as I thought. Just as I was hitting my stride with this whole socializing business, I started receiving requests from local nobles and other duchies asking not only for me to attend male gatherings, but also that I invite other archduke candidates to come to me as an archduke candidate should. The issue was that as soon as I hosted one, I would need to host many; it would introduce too much work for me to manage on my own. To make matters worse, the prince and the top-ranking duchies wouldn't stop asking me when Rozemyne was due to return.

"Father, please send Rozemyne back to the Royal Academy as soon as you can!"

"I'm sorry to tell you this, but Ferdinand says we can't send her back until it's time for the Interduchy Tournament. You don't want her causing any more problems, do you?"

At first, I accepted that answer; having even more to balance was the last thing I wanted, and with both Father and Uncle in agreement that waiting until the Interduchy Tournament was the best course of action, surely that was ideal. But my opinion changed the moment Prince Anastasius started barging into my gewinnen games demanding to know Rozemyne's whereabouts. I was willing to endure anything that would put a stop to these harsh royal interrogations.

"Father, Rozemyne is causing me problems even in her absence. Can you at least give me a precise date for when she's coming back?!"

She was a walking natural disaster who caused me problems no matter where she went. At this point, it was better to have her back in the Royal Academy.

Traugott — A Worse Punishment than Expected

"Justus, please look after Traugott."

My mother had entrusted me to my uncle, but I felt so pathetic and embarrassed that I wanted nothing more than to go back to the Royal Academy. For that reason, I was relieved from the bottom of my heart when the family meeting ended and my return could finally be scheduled. I wasn't in a great position socially due to having resigned from the service of an archducal family member, but I was exhausted from the endless lecturing.

Grandfather is showing a little too much favoritism to Lady Rozemyne. Sure, she's his only granddaughter, but that was just absurd.

Lord Bonifatius, my grandfather on my father's side, was famous for his overflowing love for his only granddaughter. If you asked me, his excessive affection for her was clouding his judgment. "How dare you think so lowly of Rozemyne!" he had roared. "Never before have I seen someone be so blind to their inferior status!"

Despite his bold claim, it was an unshakable truth that Lady Rozemyne had the worst blood out of all the archducal family. She couldn't even be compared to Lord Wilfried or Lady Charlotte, who had archducal blood from a greater duchy. To be honest, she was inferior even to some archnobles.

It was true that Lady Rozemyne and I were both Grandfather's kin, but looking at our mothers' sides, I was from a branch of the archducal family, whereas she was just a Leisegang. I was unequivocally superior; nobody could blame me for looking down on her a little.

That wasn't all that Grandfather got furious about, though. He had flown into a rage upon learning that my decision to become Lady Rozemyne's retainer was based entirely on a desire to learn her mana compression method, then he had grown even more furious when my refusal to obey her during a ditter game came to light. He had even started threatening to cancel my engagement to

Angelica.

I don't understand why he got so mad...

Rihyarda, my grandmother on my mother's side, had said that it didn't matter what reason you had for serving someone, as long as you served them well. By that logic, there was nothing wrong with my motivation. If obtaining her mana compression method hadn't been on the table, I would have chosen to serve Lord Wilfried instead.

One of my biggest issues with Rozemyne was her weakness—I didn't want to serve someone so frail that a few measly snowballs could knock her unconscious. There was also the fact that female archduke candidates mainly socialized through tea parties, which were unbearably boring to attend as a guard. I much preferred the idea of serving a male archduke candidate, since then I could go hunting with them or help them practice at gewinnen.

I deserve some praise here. Seriously. I've endured serving the absolute worst charge, all for the mana compression method.

Yes, I might have lost my patience with her for a moment and acted a little defiantly when she butted in during our ditter game, but how could someone so delicate know anything of value? I mean, she had so foolishly ordered me to stop attacking. Had she forgotten where we were or something? *I* was the one being abused.

To make matters worse, my engagement with Angelica had only come to be because Grandfather wanted to get his beloved disciple into the family somehow. She was a strong knight, sure, but she was a mednoble with bad grades and even worse socializing skills. In other words, she wasn't at all good enough to be my wife. I could imagine that Angelica and her family would suffer from our engagement being canceled, since she was about to graduate, but it wouldn't impact me in the least.

My parents had scolded me to death for angering Grandfather, since he was a member of the archducal family and all, but I was more than satisfied with my current situation. I was free again. A shiver had run down my spine when Hartmut butted in, but Lady Rozemyne had saved me by being so compassionate... or rather, by being such a weakhearted softie.

I was finally about to learn the mana compression method that had driven me from the onset, and I had resigned instead of getting fired. Grandmother had stopped her constant seething, and my social wounds were fairly shallow.

No matter what my loudmouthed grandmother and parents say, I've already quit. I'm not a retainer anymore.

I wouldn't need to call that weak child who was mocked for looking so young and who needed magic tools just to move "my lady" anymore. She was a tyrant who strove to spend every single day in the library, not showing any consideration for her retainers' schedules or Professor Solange's struggles having to host an archduke candidate so regularly. She could have just sent a scholar to fetch books for her, but no, she had to go herself and cause problems for everyone.

Of course, with my whole family mad at me, not even I could deny that I had made a mistake. That mistake wasn't quitting as a retainer, though—it was serving Lady Rozemyne in the first place.

Well, I'm free now.

That was what I wanted to believe, but it wasn't entirely true—not yet, anyway. My uncle Justus was going to be serving as my attendant for the second half of the term. It was a roundabout way of saying that he was acting as a spy for my family.

"To think I'd need to serve my incompetent nephew like this..." I remembered Uncle saying. "Family order or not, this is a drag."

It annoyed me that he, of all people, had called me incompetent, especially when he had apparently been removed from Lady Georgine's potential retainers due to being so obsessed with his hobbies that he couldn't properly serve anyone. He had only ended up in his current position because the previous aub had ordered him to serve Lord Ferdinand, who was at the time being ostracized by Lady Veronica.

Still, even if my uncle was a little incompetent himself, I was happier to have him as my attendant than Grandmother, who had wanted the position so that she could "beat some sense" back into me or something. Uncle was still working under Ferdinand, having never been relieved of duty, so I was sure he could do at least the most basic stuff.

Lord Karstedt took out a letter and gave it to Uncle. "Lord Ferdinand said this was good timing and agreed to lend you to him," he said.

"Good timing?" Uncle repeated. He looked at the letter, then nodded to himself. "Alright. Let's go."

In an instant, Uncle seemed to take back everything he had said previously. It seemed that he really was loyal when it came to following orders. This was good for me too, since it meant he probably wouldn't cause any problems as my attendant.

"Mother, stay with Father," I said. "You haven't been feeling well, have you?"

"Because of all the trouble you've caused, Traugott," my mother replied, fixing me with a stern glare. "You would do well to learn your place in the Royal Academy. Do you understand me?"

I paid no mind to her words and stepped onto the teleportation circle with Uncle. Once I was back in the Royal Academy, I would finally regain control. Or, that was what I assumed.

"Well, I'm going to the common room," I said.

"Uh, no, you're not. Come on." Uncle grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and unceremoniously dragged me to my room. I was preparing for another lecture, but instead, he simply pointed at my mountain of luggage. "Hurry up and get your room ready."

"What? Unpacking my things is *your* responsibility as my attendant."

"If you don't unpack, I can't get you changed, meaning I can't do my job. Now get a move on."

He wasn't making any sense. It was down to him to prepare my room, and there was nothing stopping him from doing it.

"Justus, you—"

"Call me 'Uncle.' I'm here as your attendant because the family decided it and Lord Ferdinand ordered it. I haven't signed an agreement to serve you, and you are not my lord. Don't forget that."

"Wh... Wh-Wh..."

He was right that there wasn't a contract between us, but his coming to the Royal Academy as my attendant meant that I was his lord. I didn't understand what he was saying at all.

"Lord Ferdinand has ordered me to gather intelligence in the Royal Academy, report on the state of the dormitory, and train the scholars here," Uncle continued. "Serving you is my lowest priority and will only be done when I have time to waste. Now, don't get in my way. I'm busy."

"What?! But in the Royal Academy, I'm your—"

"Lord Ferdinand is my one and only lord. Have you really forgotten that your family is punishing you right now? You truly must have crap for brains. I mean, come on... You're incompetent, but you must understand this much, surely. Having to explain even the most elementary things is such a pain in the neck."

To my disbelief, Uncle unpacked only his own belongings, then sat at my desk and started reading through some paperwork. He could at least start helping me now that he was done.

"Uncle, if you've finished yours, you could—"

"Can you not even manage this much?" Uncle asked. "Finish what you can while I do my first patrol of the dormitory." He gave me the very sincere and exasperated expression of someone looking at the biggest idiot they had ever seen, then left my room with his paperwork in hand. Only then did it occur to me that he really wasn't intending to help me at all. I could only bring one attendant with me, and with Uncle acting as he was, I wouldn't be able to live a proper noble lifestyle.

I guess my family's punishment for me actually begins here...

And so, I gritted my teeth in frustration and started putting my luggage away. Uncle returned a short while later, but upon seeing me, he merely said, "Still not done?" before resuming his seat at my desk and writing. He looked entirely like a scholar.

I don't know what he's doing... but it can't be good.

Now that I thought about it, I didn't know much about Uncle. I remembered Mother and Grandmother bemoaning that he only seemed to love information of the useless kind, but the rest of my knowledge about him was based on the few occasions we had actually met.

"Hm? An ordonnanz?" An ivory bird flew into the room, so I extended my arm for it to land on. Rather than stopping for me, however, it went straight over to Uncle.

"This is Cornelius," the bird said. "I've returned to the Royal Academy. Lady Rozemyne will be arriving momentarily." It repeated this message twice more, then turned back into a yellow feystone.

"Understood. I'll see that she arrives safely," Uncle said in response, setting down his pen. "We have to go greet Lady Rozemyne, and you still haven't finished unpacking? I don't understand how it's possible for someone to be this slow. Are you really my sister's son? Ah, right... Your father's an oaf, isn't he? There's no helping that you inherited his stupidity."

"Uncle, what did you ju—"

"I told you to hurry up and finish unpacking."

Only then did Uncle offer some assistance, and he went through my luggage at such a tremendous speed that I really wished he had just helped to begin with. He was expecting too much from an apprentice knight like me; I was never trained as an attendant.

"Right. Let's go, Traugott."

"Go where...?"

"You really don't listen, do you? I just said that Lady Rozemyne's about to arrive and we'll be going to greet her," Uncle said. Once again, he was looking at me like I was stupid, and I could feel the anger bubbling up inside of me.

"You're my attendant! Just what do you think you're doing?!"

"Lord Ferdinand gave me work to do. And you need to apologize to Lady Rozemyne either way. Don't tell me that nonstop lecturing during the family meeting wasn't enough for you to figure out what you've done wrong."

I really don't think it was that big of a deal, though...

I dared not say this out loud, of course; the last thing I wanted was Uncle relaying my comments back home and inspiring another family meeting at the end of the academic term. I agreed to go with him, and off we went. Giving a superficial apology to Lady Rozemyne would probably be good enough.

"It has been too long, Lady Rozemyne."

Uncle had spoken up before I could even say anything. I assumed that Lady Rozemyne would find it strange to have been greeted by my attendant rather than by me personally... but on the contrary, she responded to him with a smile.

"I have heard you served the Plantin Company well, Justus. They survived the two years I was absent in large part because of you, and for that, I thank you. I look forward to your continued service."

Uncle helped her out...?

I was surprised to learn that my mysterious, rarely seen uncle was somehow connected to Lady Rozemyne. She had Lord Ferdinand as her guardian, so their knowing each other wasn't too unusual, but I certainly hadn't expected that she would be on such good terms with his retainers.

I wonder what work Uncle's been doing... Grandmother and Mother make it sound as though he's incompetent, but maybe that's not the case after all.

"Guh!"

A sharp pain shot through my side, interrupting my thoughts. It was so disorienting that it actually took me a moment to realize that Uncle had elbowed me. I wanted to shout, "What do you think you're doing?!" but the pain was so great that I couldn't even speak. It took all of my willpower to not let out another pained grunt.

"Traugott, don't you have something to say?" Uncle asked in a low voice, staring at me with cold eyes. "What's wrong with you? Speak up."

My breath caught in my throat; I could hardly be defiant when he was this furious. I gritted my teeth, rubbed my aching side, and then knelt before Lady Rozemyne. "My shallow thinking led to me being unthinkably rude. I am truly sorry, Lady Rozemyne. I apologize from the bottom of my heart."

That should do it.

Despite my expectations, the look in Uncle's eyes only grew colder. He told Lady Rozemyne not to accept my apology and then proceeded to ignore me entirely, instead turning the conversation to the scholars he was going to be training while they headed to the common room. I might as well not have been there.

I followed them into the common room, and straight away, students came to welcome Lady Rozemyne. I went to leave, since I wasn't her retainer anymore, only for Uncle to strike my side once again.

"Gah!"

"Where do you think you're going? Don't leave my side until after my conversation with Lady Rozemyne is over. How do you still not understand your place?" Uncle said, chiding me quietly enough that nobody would overhear him. His lecture ended there, however, as his attention abruptly returned to his conversation with Lady Rozemyne. I couldn't believe that she was talking to *him*, not me.

"We have no dorm supervisor to rely on," she said. "You may speak not as Traugott's attendant, but as Ferdinand's scholar."

His scholar? Not an attendant?

This seemed to be something that Lady Rozemyne and Uncle both understood as a matter of course, but I wasn't following whatsoever. Uncle went on to question the other students about the current state of affairs, then he started belting out precise instructions one after another. I widened my eyes; the incompetent buffoon I had expected was nowhere to be seen.

The day after I revised my evaluation of my uncle, he told me that somebody else was going to be taking his place as my attendant. “I’m needed at a tea party with the prince today, so Mother will serve you while I’m gone. I need to start my preparations, so you can go wait in the common room if you want.”

“I see...” I replied with a nod. There was little point in me saying anything else; the decision had clearly already been made. In fact, the news actually came as somewhat of a relief—Grandmother would at least take her job as an attendant seriously, even if she tended to be quick to lecture me.

I went ahead to the common room, where people were eagerly discussing the Interduchy Tournament. Uncle had said that Wilfried’s retainers should take the lead, but when it came to ditter, the words of Cornelius and Leonore carried the most weight.

Everyone had come to realize just how much Lady Rozemyne’s leadership and her guard knights’ involvement had contributed to our previous victory—especially after our ditter rematch in their absence had resulted in a tragic defeat. Leonore was retraining us based on data she had accumulated and fey creature strategies she had studied, focusing in particular on our coordination. I could feel everyone’s eyes on me as she repeated time and time again that we should never break formation, and every time I tried to explain that attack power should take priority, she told me to shut up and that I still didn’t understand anything. It was the first time someone had disregarded me so completely.

“Oh...? And who is that?” Lady Rozemyne suddenly asked. An unfamiliar woman had appeared in the common room. She looked a lot like Mother, albeit with broader shoulders. And then it struck me—I recognized exactly who this person was. It was Uncle.

What does he think he’s doing?!

He had said that he needed to prepare for the prince’s tea party, but who would have expected that to include cross-dressing? I glanced over at Grandmother, who was most capable of stopping him. She looked exceptionally displeased but made no attempt to interfere.

Don’t tell me she knew about this!

My mouth hung open; I felt so betrayed that I was at a complete loss for words. In the meantime, Uncle marched up to Lady Rozemyne and then knelt before her. I could tell from the surprise written all over her face that this was new to her as well.

Please, Lady Rozemyne! Knock him down and order him to change immediately!

My silent pleas fell on deaf ears, however, as Lady Rozemyne instead asked Uncle how he could change his voice like that. She was focusing on the wrong thing.

Are you really okay with this?! You're the one who's going to have to endure it, not me!

It didn't make sense, but Lady Rozemyne wasn't even questioning this strange new development. Hartmut had even started to wonder whether he should adopt Uncle's technique.

Obviously not! No scholar needs to learn that!

I was finally spurred to protest when Uncle said that he was going to take Mother's name, but he shot me down without a moment's hesitation. Everyone in the dormitory was regarding me with sympathetic eyes; if my family was putting me through this on purpose, then it was much too cruel.

"Grandmother, is this all part of my punishment?" I asked upon returning to my room.

"Indeed, and you must resign yourself to it. In truth, it was originally suggested that you be sent to the temple, but milady protested. My boy Ferdinand then asked us to get Justus into the Royal Academy, which led us to where we are now."

I couldn't help but gulp. It hadn't occurred to me that resigning from being a retainer was so serious that it could cost you your whole life as a noble.

"Personally, I am not pleased to have Justus serving milady in these circumstances," Grandmother continued. "However, this is something that both Ferdinand and Lord Sylvester have asked for. If Lady Rozemyne has accepted it, then I need to as well. Such is the punishment I must endure."

"Your punishment, Grandmother...?"

"Yes. After all, I am the one who recommended you for Lady Rozemyne's service," Grandmother replied, slumping forward and shaking her head.

I thought back to when we had first discussed my becoming Lady Rozemyne's retainer. At the time, she had still been asleep in her jureve, and I was being questioned about serving Lord Wilfried as a guard knight.

"So, Traugott—you intend to wait for Lady Rozemyne to wake up rather than serve Lord Wilfried?" Grandmother asked.

"I do," I replied. "I want to learn her mana compression method, so I would very much appreciate you recommending me when she wakes up."

As far as I was concerned, I didn't have any other choice. Cornelius's and Angelica's mana quantities were growing at such an absurd rate that they were now far ahead of me—an unbearably humiliating realization, considering that we had once been on the same level. I needed to catch up, but the only way I could learn the compression method was by serving Lady Rozemyne.

"There aren't many potential retainers who are willing to wait for milady now that she has been asleep for over a year," Grandmother said. "I understand that your motivation is to obtain the mana compression method, but you must assure me that you will serve milady *faithfully*. Only then can I recommend you."

I said that I would indeed serve her faithfully—although I made a mental note that this faith would only last until the day I was taught the mana compression method. Grandmother was a retainer herself, and she had changed whom she served again and again according to the times. I was confident that I could do the same and find a new lord after accomplishing my objective.

I don't get why I'm being told off... Grandmother has resigned so many times in the past. This is only my first.

Despite my curiosity, Grandmother looked so withered that it didn't feel right trying to interrogate her. Instead, I just remained silent.

"I must write a report at once... Traugott, we're returning to your room," Uncle said as soon as he returned from wherever he had been with Lady Rozemyne. I wanted to stay in the common room and continue talking about the upcoming Interduchy Tournament, but before I could even protest, everyone started urging me out.

Uncle was speeding through the mountain of work that needed to be done before the Interduchy Tournament, and he had managed to secure the full support of the other students after only two days. My classmates now saw me as his tagalong, when it was supposed to be the other way around. I returned to my room, bemoaning that my punishment never seemed to end.

Talking to Uncle was the last thing I wanted to do, but I managed to force out a "So, what do you need me for?" while he removed his hairpin.

"I don't have time. Help me take off these clothes," he said, not even deigning to look at me. He took out some paper and started writing something.

"Okay, first of all, please don't ever dress like that again. And as for that female voice you were putting on—"

"Don't even *try* to lecture me about my work. I did all this to find out what the prince, Klassenberg, and Lady Rozemyne were talking about, and it worked perfectly. Lord Ferdinand is going to be overjoyed."

Overjoyed...? So, is Lord Ferdinand the one who got him to cross-dress? Is his head on right?

Normally, a retainer like Uncle would immediately be relieved of duty. He wasn't normal—a fact that had become abundantly clear when he suddenly appeared with brown hair like my mother's and asked me whether any hairpins were still left.

"Well, I've got to admit," I said, "I'm impressed that you managed to get hold of a female attendant uniform."

"I took great care to make it look like my mother's and sister's uniforms, but this isn't a uniform itself. Guess you've got bad eyes too, huh?"

Once again, I didn't really understand what he meant, but he maintained that his clothes weren't the same as those of an actual attendant. This wasn't an issue, though, as they only needed to look the same from a distance. It was interesting and all, but in terms of shock value, it paled in comparison to something else he had just admitted.

"Wait, so you made that?" I asked, dumbstruck. "Don't tell me you did it all on your own."

"Naturally. A traditional seamstress would have made something that could only be worn with assistance from others. I wanted clothes that I could put on without any help, so I did all the modifications myself."

I really didn't need that much detail. I'm just surprised that you can sew at all, Uncle!

Just how passionate was he about cross-dressing? The very thought made my head ache. Uncle removed the brown wig he had been wearing, then started untying some strings that were fastened behind his neck. It wasn't long before he had removed the ornaments used to hide his front buttons.

"The uniforms might *look* similar," Uncle continued, "but as I said, I can put this one on by myself. And on top of that, I can hide a bunch of tools inside it. Take a look at this, for example."

"Uncle! Put your skirt down! Please! I don't want to see that!"

In the end, I conceded and agreed to help Uncle. I could feel my pride as an apprentice knight getting weaker and weaker as I undid the various strings keeping his outfit in place and started putting away boxes.

To my surprise, Uncle's cross-dressing was largely accepted in the dormitory—or maybe it was more accurate to say that everyone was averting their eyes, since it didn't have anything to do with them. At the same time, his poor treatment of me was becoming common knowledge among the other Ehrenfest students, and people were starting to give me sympathetic looks wherever I went. The attendant who was supposed to be supporting my lifestyle was instead doing his own thing and ignoring me entirely. In a way, my quality of life was even lower than that of a laynoble.

For a time, I was convinced that everyone was talking about my tragic circumstances, but when I eventually calmed down and looked around the dormitory with Uncle, I realized that everything was being run by Lady Rozemyne's retainers. It was starting to become painfully clear who would one day become the most powerful person in Ehrenfest—and it wasn't Lord Wilfried.

And I could have been there with her...

I regretted my decisions now more than ever—but then I was struck with a genius idea. My punishment and Uncle's presence here were both the result of my choice to resign as Lady Rozemyne's guard knight. In other words, I simply needed to rejoin her service. That would calm everyone, including Grandfather, and put an end to my terrible plight.

"Uncle," I said upon returning to my room, "I'm going to apologize to Lady Rozemyne and return to being her guard knight."

He blinked at me several times and then gave a derisive snort. "Are you really too stupid to realize that Lady Rozemyne cut you off completely? I've seen some idiots in my time, but wow, you take the cake."

"What?! But..."

Lady Rozemyne is a weakhearted softie. As long as I shed a few tears and show her that I regret what I did, she'll probably forgive me.

I wasn't stupid enough to voice my intentions, but Uncle must have read my thoughts. The pit of my stomach was suddenly racked with pain so overwhelming that I couldn't even draw a breath. Uncle had flung me up into the air, then violently slammed me against the floor. Now, his fingers were clenched around my throat.

"Nn... Guh..."

Uncle wasn't even a knight, yet I couldn't throw him off no matter how much I tried. My pride as an apprentice knight had already been in tatters, and now it was reduced to nothing.

"Lady Rozemyne has cut you off. *Completely*," Uncle spat. "Yes, she asked Mother not to send you to the temple, but that was only because she doesn't want you near her. She doesn't want to waste even the briefest moment thinking about or dealing with you. Do you understand that? You mean less to her than an orphan in the temple."

That can't be true...

Grandmother had similarly told me that Lady Rozemyne had argued against me being sent to the temple. Hearing this news had only further convinced me that Lady Rozemyne was too soft for her own good, but I was evidently mistaken.

My surroundings had started to fade when Uncle loosened his grip around my throat just enough to allow me a gasp of air. He had my life in his hands, and he was looking down at me with utter exasperation.

"I can't believe you're still so blind, and after all that scolding at the family meeting..." Uncle said. "Everyone at the Royal Academy knows that while you technically resigned, you might as well have been relieved of duty. The archducal couple knows this as well, of course, since they receive reports from Mother and Karstedt."

"So what?" I choked in response. "I'm going to be a knight commander and not have any lord or lady. Like Grandfather. I'll never serve. Lady Rozemyne understood my wish."

Uncle watched me with a flat expression, then a cold smile played on his lips. "Only members of the archducal family can become the knight commander without serving anyone. You're just an archnoble. You really don't know your place, do you?"

"That can't be right... Lady Rozemyne said—"

"Did she actually say that you could become a knight commander who doesn't serve anyone? Or did she just say that she understood your wish?"

The blood drained from my face. Uncle was right; Lady Rozemyne had said that she understood my wish and nothing more. In fact, now that I thought back on our conversation, I seemed to remember her saying that it wasn't possible for me to become the knight commander without serving anyone. I assumed that she meant I wasn't strong enough and needed to train harder, but maybe she was actually saying that I wasn't of a high enough status.

"And anyway, you already ruined the one chance you had at becoming the knight commander," Uncle continued. "You've ruined your reputation just like Lord Wilfried ruined his when he went into the Ivory Tower. Get some self-awareness and accept that you've committed the grave sin of ignorance. Your father's only talent is his ability to brag about his house being linked to the archduke—and to most people, you lot are just regular archnobles anyway. Your slipup has cost your family dearly, and they're so worried about you bringing more shame upon them that they'll never let you leave for another duchy. Your future has already been decided—you'll stay here in Ehrenfest as nothing more than a regular knight."

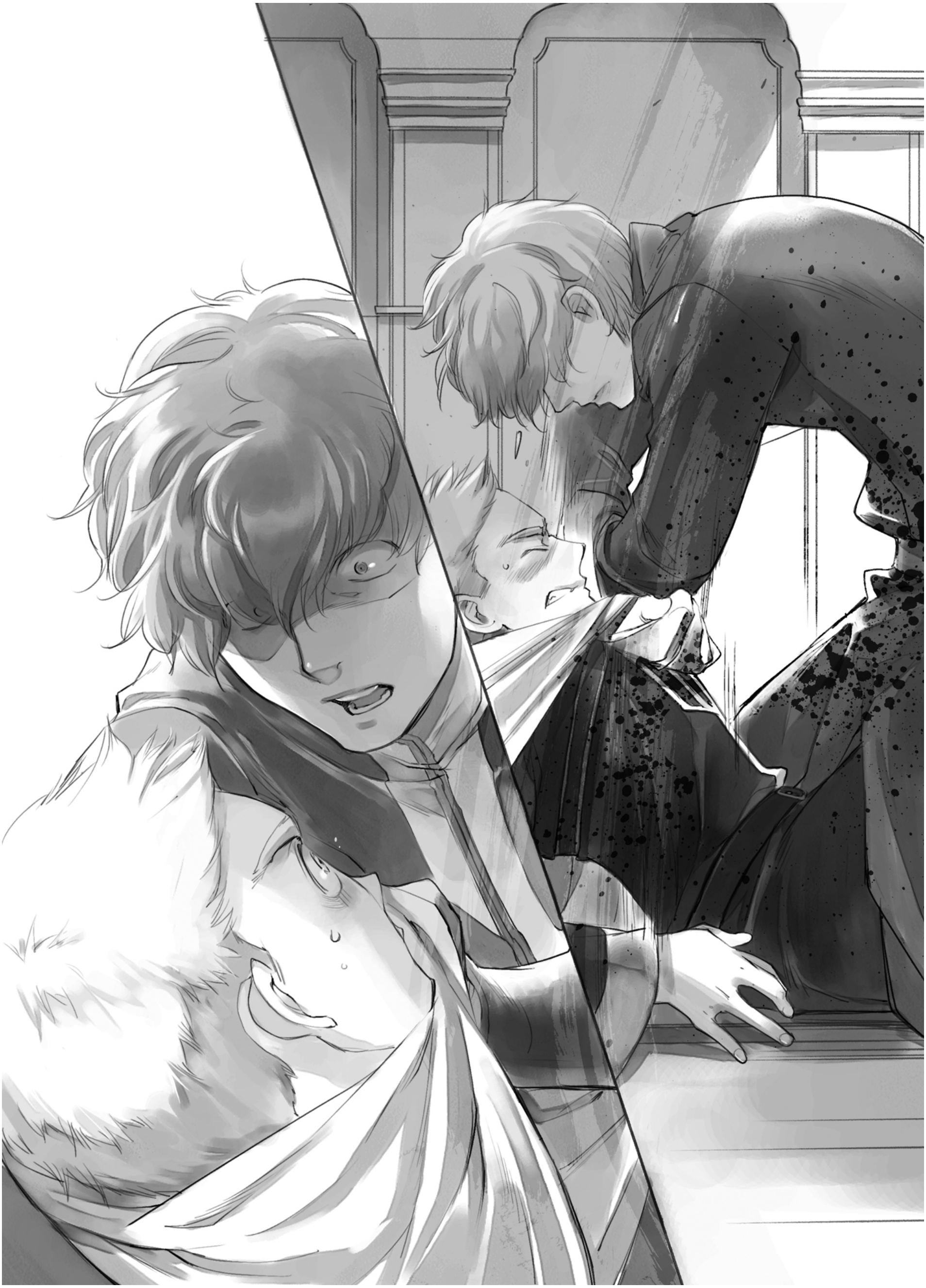
Uncle was making my future seem dark and bleak, so I fought back, desperate to save myself. If serving the archduke was necessary for me to become the knight commander, then I could just serve someone else. Grandmother certainly hadn't stayed with the same charge her entire life.

"That can't be right," I said. "You're wrong. There's still a way for me to become the knight commander. After I get another lord or lady, like Grandmother always does, then—"

"Shut up."

Uncle's eyes flashed with murderous intent, and he tightened his grip around my throat again. I couldn't breathe; he really was trying to kill me.

"Mother is from an archducal branch family that has sworn loyalty to the archduke," Uncle snarled. "She is not given a choice in whom she serves; she obeys Aub Ehrenfest's orders and works beneath whatever member of the archducal family is least able to acquire retainers. I will not allow you to defile her life with your words."



I hadn’t known that about Grandmother. Her work as a retainer had come up before, but only now did I understand what it really entailed. I tried to speak, but I was so starved for air that the words wouldn’t come out. Tears welled in my eyes and my vision started to blur, but Uncle showed no mercy.

“If you don’t stop being such an idiot and start doing better, I won’t let go next time.”

It was with this chilling threat that Uncle finally released my neck. I desperately tried to remain conscious, but a moment later, the world around me faded into darkness.

Wilfried — Uncle's Retainer

Justus came to the Royal Academy on the same day as Rozemyne, now serving as Traugott's new attendant. I was actually thankful to have him here—he got Rozemyne to take on the socializing work that had been piling up while she was away, meaning I could finally have some fun getting ready for the Interduchy Tournament. He even gave me lots of advice on what I should prepare, a stack of papers on fey creatures and their weak points that he had compiled while gathering ingredients, and a list of unusual ditter strategies employed in the past.

"During a group battle, it's crucial to have someone overseeing everything from above and giving instructions," Justus began. "Everyone needs to listen to that person without fail. If anyone rushes forward on their own in an attempt to seize glory for themselves, the whole strategy falls apart."

This explanation was punctuated with a stern glare at Traugott, an apprentice knight who had resigned from serving as Rozemyne's guard knight. According to my own knights, he had gone against Rozemyne's orders during a match against Dunkelfelger and was generally known for acting rebelliously. Many overheard Rihyarda's furious rants in the dormitory, and everyone knew that his resignation was actually him getting fired.

There had been a time when I probed Traugott about being my own guard knight—he was Lord Bonifatius's grandson and reasonably strong for his age. He had refused me in favor of serving Rozemyne, however—which had made his recent resignation from her service all the more surprising.

Sometime after Rozemyne returned to Ehrenfest, Dunkelfelger sent us a request for a ditter rematch, which I accepted. And during the game, Traugott had flown straight toward the enemy. I remembered thinking that he was brave and motivated, but given what Justus was saying now and the displeasure in his eyes, it was starting to seem more likely that Traugott had only been focused on glory.

Rozemyne had apparently won our first game against Dunkelfelger using a devious scheme of some kind, but we hadn't come up with any clever tricks for the rematch. And without our main powerhouses, Cornelius and Angelica, we were demolished more or less instantly. It hadn't even been a real match. Professor Rauffen had been visibly disappointed, and his mood only seemed to lift when one of his apprentice knights said they could just challenge us again when Rozemyne returned.

Come on! Don't tell him that!

After the match, Traugott was made to return to Ehrenfest. He had only come back to the dormitory today, and it was obvious from his dejected expression and the fact that Justus was now attending to him that his family had given him a stern talking-to for resigning as Rozemyne's guard knight. It couldn't have been easy for him, considering that Lord Bonifatius would have been among them. Rumor had it that the old knight commander was prone to using his iron fists whenever he was scolding someone.

I'm just glad that Traugott managed to get through all that alive.

That reminded me—Rozemyne had mentioned that Father and Uncle entrusted Justus with a lot of scholar work. I could imagine that he was going to struggle, having to balance this with attending Traugott, but his help here was bound to be appreciated nonetheless. Our dormitory supervisor Professor Hirschur couldn't be relied on for anything, after all.

"Justus, I've heard that Professor Hirschur is planning to publish research on the large shumils in the library. Will that be alright?" I asked. These magic tools were the heirlooms of old royalty, and I was cautious of another fight starting over them.

Back when Rozemyne had first become their master, my instinct had been to tell her that she should give them up—that the library had managed well enough without them. However, after seeing how invested she was in the library and the joy on Professor Solange's face, the words had stuck in my throat. It was then and there that we had lost the best way to keep Rozemyne from causing incidents.

And that brings us here, to this mess. I think all of my problems began with those shumils, to be honest.

Rozemyne had needed to make new clothes for the magic tools as their master, Professor Hirschur had gone on a rampage, defending ourselves against Dunkelfelger had led to a game of ditter, and then that had resulted in socializing with the prince. I wanted to take things a lot more slowly and carefully from this point onward.

Justus stroked his chin as he considered my question. “I can’t imagine it being too much of an issue, but as Lady Rozemyne has a meeting with the prince tomorrow, I will ask her to consult him. His permission should assuage your fears.”

“Sounds good.”

As far as I was concerned, there was nothing better than getting rid of a potential source of problems. All of my time spent with Rozemyne had taught me that preparation was key to everything—although Rozemyne herself often acted so abruptly that it led straight to errors.

“I expect the apprentice attendants will struggle the most during this year’s Interduchy Tournament,” Justus said.

“You think so? I’ve heard they consistently have the least work out of anyone, to the point where they barely have anything to do at all.”

“Hah. That takes me back,” Justus replied, his eyes crinkling in a smile. “I remember apprentice attendants saying the same thing when Lord Ferdinand first joined the Royal Academy. Oh, how they suffered.”

“They suffered...? What in the world did Uncle do?”

“The same thing he ended up doing again and again: come first-in-class without batting an eye.”

It seemed that Uncle had started attending the Academy when Father was in his final year, meaning there was a short period when there were two Ehrenfest archduke candidates. Father had expertly managed the feverous students while Uncle had perfectly dealt with the preparations, making them an excellent duo.

“Lord Ferdinand excelled so much as a student, and Lord Sylvester was dead set on inviting Lady Florencia that, well... many circumstances overlapped. That year, during the Interduchy Tournament, Ehrenfest received far more visitors than usual,” Justus continued. His face then clouded over as he said, “The situation ended up being too much for Ehrenfest’s apprentice attendants.”

“Hm?”

“Our duchy’s space was thrown into chaos. All the attendants who had come along with the students were told to help out, but even then, we eventually ran out of tea and sweets. In the end, our apprentice attendants were ranked the lowest out of all the duchies. You and Lady Rozemyne are both here this year, you're starting trends, the greater duchies have their eyes on you, and the prince is involved; I expect the chaos to be even greater than it was back then," Justus warned, causing all the apprentice attendants in earshot to pale at once. "You'll need to prepare three times as much tea and sweets as you currently have planned, and you will need to have the students' attendants ready and waiting to serve visitors at any moment."

"Three times as much...?" the apprentice attendants asked, looking suspicious.

Justus shrugged. "It's up to Lord Wilfried to decide whether he takes my advice. This is his discussion, after all."

I examined Justus for a moment, then turned to the attendants and said, "Do as he says. After witnessing all the disorder that Rozemyne caused without even being here, I'm confident that we can't rely on our past experiences. It's in our best interests to listen to someone with proper expertise."

Upon hearing my announcement, the apprentice attendants all turned serious and started redoing their plans from the beginning. Justus oversaw things all the while, being the "someone with proper expertise" I was referring to.

It was only the next day that we learned about Uncle's retainer gleefully cross-dressing and walking around the Royal Academy as Rozemyne's retainer. From there, people started to pity Traugott for being stuck with such a weird attendant.

Rozemyne was bad enough, but now there was Justus as well... In an unusual twist, it seemed that Uncle liked to surround himself with weirdos.

Oh, wait... Uncle's weird too!

I clapped my hands together in realization... and then felt a strange chill run down my spine for some reason.

Hannelore — Ehrenfest's Tea Party

Ehrenfest had announced its plans to hold a large-scale tea party with all of the other duchies, and our invitation arrived the moment Lady Rozemyne returned to the Royal Academy. It couldn't have arrived any sooner than this, of course—Ehrenfest had a female archduke candidate, and it wasn't an option for an archnoble to invite archduke candidates from other duchies in her place. Lord Wilfried could have hosted the tea party, but I believed that he was busy with male socializing.

"How loathsome..." Lestilaut grumbled. "That fake saint declined our duchy's request. Hannelore, you have no need to participate in this tea party."

According to him, since Ehrenfest had thus far only hosted tea parties for middle- and bottom-ranking duchies, there was no need for Dunkelfelger to participate in this one. I considered this tea party to be a pivotal moment for me, however. Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time was granting me her guidance at last. In her infinite mercy, she had finally afforded me an opportunity to apologize to Lady Rozemyne, whom I had failed to catch so many times before.

"No, Brother," I replied. "I intend to use this opportunity to meet Lady Rozemyne properly."

He shrugged and relented, but only on the condition that I brought his retainer Kenntrips with me to the tea party.

I suppose that, despite his complaints, Brother shares my endless curiosity about Ehrenfest...

Of course, I accepted my brother's proposal; attending the tea party was more important than anything to me.

"Lady Hannelore, Lady Hannelore!" Professor Rauffen said. "I do ask that you challenge Lady Rozemyne to a ditter rematch at the tea party." There was a hint of desperation in his eyes, indicating that he hadn't yet given up on the idea.

I furrowed my brow. "Has their dormitory supervisor Professor Hirschur not officially refused the proposal already?"

Professor Rauffen had sent his request to Ehrenfest as soon as he found out about Lady Rozemyne's return, but Professor Hirschur had naturally refused him. "Lady Rozemyne participated in the duel for the library's shumils only because she is their master," she had said. "She is not an apprentice knight, nor is she qualified to play ditter, so we cannot agree to a rematch."

This response had left Professor Rauffen grief-stricken. No matter how you looked at it, though, Professor Hirschur was completely in the right.

"I am told by my scholars that Lady Rozemyne is busy with socializing. Surely she does not have the time to spend on ditter," I said. Ehrenfest had already turned down my private request for a personal tea party. Apparently, they had received invitations from Prince Anastasius and Klassenberg's Lady Eglantine, so they didn't have time to spare.

It seemed there were many duchies who wanted to form bonds with Lady Rozemyne, who had introduced more trends this year than anyone else, but their requests for tea parties had all been turned down. To make up for this, Ehrenfest had expressed their intentions to host a tea party themselves for everyone to come to. Thus, although my inquiry about a personal tea party had ended in refusal, they held no ill will toward me.

"I shall be off then, Brother."

"Don't let your guard down under any circumstances, Hannelore. This may be a tea party, but we don't know what methods Ehrenfest is going to use. Cordula, Kenntrips—stay on alert as well."

My brother was quite the worrywart according to his apprentice scholar Kenntrips. He had apparently spent much time trying to figure out how the both of us could attend the tea party together, despite the fact that Ehrenfest was only accepting one participant per duchy, due to the sheer number of duchies being invited.

"I can hardly imagine Lady Rozemyne being someone dangerous, though..." I muttered. It was true that my knowledge about her amounted to little more than occasional glimpses during our lessons and a brief exchange with Lord Wilfried, but I simply couldn't believe her being the villain my brother seemed to assume she was. Our apprentice knights had only nice things to say about her, claiming that she hadn't grown arrogant even after snatching victory from the jaws of defeat and that she was judicious enough to understand both her foes' strengths and her own weaknesses.

Dunkelfelger has always valued strength above all else. I only hope that Lady Rozemyne isn't being troubled by Professor Rauffen's incessant messages.

It was third bell when I exited my dormitory and started toward Ehrenfest's tea party room, walking quickly but not *too* quickly. Upon our arrival, Cordula touched the feystone attached to the door marked thirteen, ringing the bell to announce that we were here. It opened slowly to reveal Lord Wilfried, who welcomed me inside.

"Lady Hannelore. Thank you for coming."

"I thank you ever so much for inviting me, Lord Wilfried. I truly have been looking forward to today."

I was sure that I had arrived particularly early, but when I entered the room, I saw that Lady Detlinde was already sitting in her chair. I then noticed Lady Rozemyne, who was speaking to Lord Rudiger of Frenbeltag.

"You would consider me a relative despite the fact I am adopted, Lord Rudiger?" Lady Rozemyne asked.

"I wish to be as friendly as possible," he replied.

Oh, how nice Lord Rudiger has it, being able to speak with Lady Rozemyne so freely and whenever he wants. If only that were me...

"Lady Rozemyne... is busy, I see. I will greet her later," I said, sighing as my unfortunate timing inconvenienced me once again. I was guided to my seat by Lord Wilfried, after which Lady Detlinde greeted us with a smile.

I had already invited Lady Detlinde to many tea parties this year. She was an archduke candidate from the greater duchy of Ahrensbach—a beautiful young woman with distinctive green eyes and fluffy golden hair. I understood that she was currently struggling with the fact that there were few boys her age and of a similar mana level who were willing to marry into Ahrensbach.

Being in a position where one must become the next archduchess is surely difficult indeed.

I had never even thought about becoming Dunkelfelger's next archduchess; there wasn't a doubt in my mind that my brother would find an ideal partner from another duchy to support him. Father had mentioned that with my poor timing and lack of confidence, it was highly unlikely that I would ever be married to royalty. To be honest, this news had come as a tremendous relief.

More and more visitors arrived as I continued my conversation with Lady Detlinde, including Lady Eglantine of Klassenberg.

"Lady Rozemyne, I thank you ever so much for inviting me today. I am determined to introduce you to my other friends," Lady Eglantine said with a reciprocated smile. Her friends then gathered around Lady Rozemyne, and I watched as they were introduced one by one.

I could have socialized with Lady Eglantine as well, but there was no guarantee that she would treat me with kindness. During the recent civil war, Dunkelfelger had joined Klassenberg in allying with the fifth prince, but Klassenberg received better treatment due to housing the former princess Lady Eglantine, so there was a bit of tension between our duchies.

Ehrenfest is neutral, however, so I remain hopeful. Lord Wilfried did not shirk me, and they seem to be on good terms with Ahrensbach as well, so everything should be fine.

And then it dawned on me—Ehrenfest was *neutral*. It was possible that Lady Rozemyne was handling socializing with Klassenberg and their associates, while Lord Wilfried dealt with Ahrensbach and Dunkelfelger.

Oh, what an awful coincidence...

For a moment, I unconsciously lowered my head, but I quickly stood up straight again; I couldn't risk appearing down at this tea party.

"Cordula, I wish to leave my seat for a moment," I said, then stood up and excused myself under the guise of using the restroom. Only once I was alone in a private bathroom did I let out a heavy sigh.

I must not get depressed. The tea party has only just begun.

Dunkelfelger could emulate Ehrenfest, having Lestilaut continue socializing with Ahrensbach and such while I socialized with neutral duchies.

I resolved to apologize to Lady Rozemyne today, and apologize to her I shall.

As I made my way back to my seat, feeling reinvigorated, I saw Lady Rozemyne distributing bottles to her friends. Kenntrips whispered something to Cordula, having stayed behind to observe the tea party, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"It seems that your unfortunate timing has struck again," Cordula replied. "According to Kenntrips, Lady Rozemyne stopped by to greet you while you were away."

What have I done to make Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time despise me so...? I wondered. My newly strengthened spirit was on the verge of shattering once again.

"Lady Rozemyne, what is in those jars? It smells ever so delightful."

"It is rinsham, a liquid which brings out the glossiness in one's hair. I'm afraid there's a limited amount, so I am distributing these jars only to my friends today."

"Oh my. Are you not distributing them to Lord Wilfried's friends also?" Lady Detlinde asked, turning to the boy in question with wide eyes. "You are both archduke candidates of Ehrenfest."

Lord Wilfried shrugged as more eyes gathered on him. "Well, it was Rozemyne who created rinsham in the first place. And unlike girls, I'm not too interested in glossy hair. I generally leave all matters related to beauty products to her."

I knew from a conversation with Lord Wilfried that rinsham was a popular product in Ehrenfest used to make one's hair shine. I also knew from talk among the other students that Lady Rozemyne was the one spreading it. That said, this was my first time hearing that she was the one who had created it.

So Lady Rozemyne is skilled at studying and ditter... and she's also the inventor of rinsham?!

I couldn't believe my ears; she was beyond comparison to someone like me, who struggled to maintain even a shred of the pride necessary for a greater duchy archduke candidate. And as I sat in a daze, Lady Detlinde began pleading with Lady Rozemyne for rinsham.

"So that means you will be giving me rinsham as well, yes, Lady Rozemyne?"

"Goodness, Lady Detlinde. Did Lady Rozemyne not just say she is distributing them only to her friends?" Lady Eglantine asked. She spoke with a soft smile, but there was no mistaking that she intended to chastise. "I do not believe your words thus far have been friendly in the least."

Her other friends who had received rinsham nodded in agreement; it seemed that while I was absent, Lady Detlinde had made some comments that weren't at all cordial. Lady Detlinde immediately came to her own defense, asserting that Lady Rozemyne was in fact her dear cousin.

"I had no idea you viewed me as such a precious family member, Lady Detlinde. My apologies. If you would have me, then I welcome our relationship as cousins," Lady Rozemyne said with a smile, presenting her with a small bottle of rinsham, which she eagerly accepted.

I was impressed with how gracefully Lady Rozemyne had dealt with the situation; she had very blatantly relented to stop the unpleasant exchange from dragging out any longer. However, almost immediately after this was resolved, other girls began to crowd around Lady Rozemyne, asking for bottles as well.

"Do you not want one of your own, Lady Hannelore?" Cordula asked.

"I wish to be friends with Lady Rozemyne, irrespective of rinsham," I said. "I will greet her once they have moved on."

And so, I decided to wait until the conversation had moved past rinsham, not wanting to seem like I was after material goods. I couldn't apologize for my brother's actions immediately after receiving a gift, else it wouldn't seem genuine.

Soon enough, the topic shifted from Lady Eglantine's hairpin to the graduation ceremony. Now was my chance. I made my way over to Lady Rozemyne, my hands clasped in front of my chest as I repeated a quick prayer in my head.

May Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time offer me her divine protection.

"Um, Lady Rozemyne..."

"Lady Hannelore."

"There is something I want to ask you, Lady Rozemyne..."

I looked at Lady Rozemyne, who had now been helped down from her chair by her attendants, and realized that I was quite obviously taller than her. I was often told that I was short for my age, and this was my first time meeting a classmate shorter than me.

There was a horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach that Lady Rozemyne might already dislike Dunkelfelger after my brother's actions and the ditter match, so it came as quite a relief when she looked up at me with a smile.

I must finally apologize to her for my brother's actions. Then, we can become friends...

I clenched my fists and opened my mouth, but before any words could come out—

“I thought it important to greet you properly, Lady Hannelore,” Lady Rozemyne said. “It feels like we have been just missing each other all day.”

Ah! Of course! I was so eager to apologize that I almost forgot to greet her!

Her timely remark had stopped me from committing a humiliating blunder, and even now, she looked so calm and composed. I was so ashamed about being such a poor archduke candidate that I wanted to hide away in my room, but despite feeling so depressed on the inside, I managed to keep things together and greet Lady Rozemyne. The only problem was that she was now looking at me with concern.

Is this because Lady Rozemyne noticed I completely forgot to greet her?

All of a sudden, the thought crossed my mind that perhaps I had committed some other blunder. I glanced around the room and noticed that other students were watching me, curious to see if something was about to happen. This realization made the blood drain from my face. My apology was a personal one that needed to be delivered in private, since my brother had no intention of offering a formal apology himself. In other words, it wasn’t something that I could give when there were so many eyes on me.

“I wanted to speak to you about my brother, Lady Rozemyne. But on second thought, this is not quite the place for it. I will save the matter for another time.”

At this rate, I might never get the chance to apologize...

Perhaps I could just say, “I apologize for the incident the other day” and leave it at that. Either way, my intention was to become friends with Lady Rozemyne.

But what if she doesn’t accept my friendship?

“That is not all, however.” My heart was pounding in my chest, but I made my move nonetheless. “I also wanted to ask if we could possibly be friends...”

“Lady Hannelore, I am truly sorry, but we are out of jars to distribute.”

“What...?” I asked, blinking in surprise at that unexpected answer. Lady Rozemyne was glancing at her retainers, looking thoroughly troubled.

Now it looks like I’m unreasonably demanding something that she’s already run out of. That wasn’t my intention at all. Oh, what should I *do? Why is this happening? I just wanted us to be friends.*

It seemed that my attempt to avoid looking greedy had backfired completely. I couldn't help but lower my face and say, "No, no..." while feebly shaking my head.

"Lady Rozemyne, I do believe Professor Solange mentioned that Lady Hannelore visits the library often," came a kind-sounding voice. "Perhaps you could lend her one of your books, as proof of your friendship?"

I gazed up with a start and saw that this suggestion had come from one of Lady Rozemyne's attendants.

"Oh my! You are a lover of books, Lady Hannelore?" Lady Rozemyne exclaimed, looking up at me with a beaming smile that stood in stark contrast to her previous, concerned expression. I certainly couldn't admit that this wasn't the case and that I had only visited the library to see the shumils and search for her.

"Y-Yes, well... I do not dislike them," I answered. And that... That alone was enough to make her cheeks flush red and her golden eyes sparkle. It was an expression that made it blindingly clear just how much Lady Rozemyne adored books.

"Lady Hannelore, I have some knight stories, but which would you prefer—stories focused on romance or on fighting?" Lady Rozemyne asked. "As an archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger, I presume the latter?"

I don't particularly care for either, but... I suppose a romance story would be less painful to read.

"If I had to choose, I would say that I prefer stories about romance," I said.

"I will have it sent to you at once, then. I am quite happy to have made a book-loving friend," Lady Rozemyne replied with a truly adorable smile. That, alongside the fact that she was smaller than me, made me feel a bit like I was suddenly an older sister.

She seems to have marked me as a fellow bookworm, but... that's fine. At least I've managed to become her friend. If she's going to lend me a book as proof of our friendship, then perhaps we should offer her one in return... I mean, books are very expensive; the fact that she's willing to lend us one must show how much she trusts us. We should give her one that indicates we feel the same way.

"Um, in that case, I'll lend you a book of my own in return. What would you be interested in, Lady Rozemyne?"

"I adore all books, but I would especially like to read stories about knights or romance that are rich with Dunkelfelger culture," Lady Rozemyne said after a moment spent in thought. The wide, overjoyed smile on her face seemed far more sincere than the one she had worn while managing the tea party, and it made her look a lot more her age.

"I will get it to you as soon as possible. I am so glad that we can be friends, Lady Rozemyne," I said, taking her tiny hands and squeezing them. She squeezed mine in return.

"I am glad to be your friend as well, Lady Hannelore. I... Oh...?"

Lady Rozemyne paused... then suddenly collapsed. She had dropped to the floor like a puppet with cut strings the moment we gripped hands, and it came so abruptly that I was dragged down with her. I sat there, unsure what had just happened, and when I saw the sight before me...

"Ah... AAAAAAH!" I cried. "AAAAAAAAAH!"

"Rozemyne!" Lord Wilfried shouted.

"Lord Wilfried, handle the rest here. I will take milady back to her room," Lady Rozemyne's attendant said. She noted that this was something of a common occurrence, then picked up the unconscious Lady Rozemyne and started toward their dormitory.

As a stir ran through the attendees, Lord Wilfried and those of the Ehrenfest Dormitory explained that Lady Rozemyne was of weak constitution and collapsed often.

"D-Did it happen because I took her hands?" I stammered.

"Not at all, Lady Hannelore," Lord Wilfried replied. "Rozemyne is just that sickly."

"I never thought this would happen... I just wished to be friends with Lady Rozemyne..."

"This truly isn't a major incident. When I first met her..."

Lord Wilfried went on to describe how Lady Rozemyne had collapsed when he tried running around with her on her baptism, how she had fallen unconscious when hit with snowballs, how the blood had drained from the faces of the knights, and so on. He was trying to console me by emphasizing how common this was, but the sight of Lady Rozemyne crumpling right in front of me was burned into my eyes. I could still feel her limp hands sliding out of my touch.

In the end, Lord Wilfried escorted me back to my dormitory and explained the events of the tea party to Professor Rauffen. He then apologized to me for the shock of the situation before taking his leave.

“Come again, Kenntrips? I almost don’t believe it. Hannelore felled the foul saint with a mere touch? Well done, Sister! You’re fit to be a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate after all.”

“Lord Lestilaut, please listen to my report without bias,” Kenntrips said.

“Yes, Brother,” I added. “Listen to him properly.”

Unfortunately, despite my angry interjections, Lestilaut continued saying that I had “felled the saint.” How had he managed to interpret Kenntrips’s dry, honest report in such a twisted way? He didn’t care about reality in the slightest, nor did he give any consideration to my feelings. He couldn’t have been more different from Lord Wilfried, who had even revealed shameful moments of his past to console me.

If only I could have Lord Wilfried instead of my brother...

Ortwin — The Drewanchel Siblings

“Lord Ortwin, Lady Adolphine has called for you,” an apprentice scholar said, delivering a message.

I grimaced. “Isn’t this a bit early?”

The scholar raised an eyebrow and gave me a half-smile, likely having anticipated my response. “All archduke candidates are in a similar position. Securing meeting rooms has been a struggle since before the fellowship gatherings.”

Sister had summoned me the moment we returned from the fellowship gatherings. Although we were siblings of the same mother, it was forbidden to have someone of the opposite gender enter your room within the dormitory, so I was being summoned specifically to a meeting room. Our half-siblings and adopted siblings were doubtless similarly gathering those of the same mother to plan how to handle this term at the Royal Academy.

I feel that things are even more bloodthirsty here at the dormitory than they were at the castle...

Drewanchel had notably more archduke candidates than other duchies, since it was tradition for the aub to adopt any child with enough mana and skill before they entered the Royal Academy. In other words, on top of the children from his first, second, and third wives, there was also an abundance of adopted ones. This naturally led to those who were raised under the same mother forming defensive alliances.

On average, there’s at least one archduke candidate per grade, which is a lot. I couldn’t believe how few other duchies had at the fellowship gathering.

The majority of archduke candidates, adopted or otherwise, aimed to one day become the aub—because why not? There was no reason for them to waste such a golden opportunity. For an archduke candidate to be established as the next aub, however, they needed some impressive achievements under their belt. To that end, many dedicated themselves to their studies and research in an attempt to invent new magic tools. Retainers followed the wills of their lords or ladies, so the grades of the duchy went up overall, which had ultimately led to Drewanchel being known as the duchy that used knowledge as its weapon.

I'm aiming to come first-in-class, but my biggest enemy here will probably be Lady Hannelore of Dunkelfelger.

The battle for the seat of aub was said to be harsher in Drewanchel than in any other duchy, so why were even more children being adopted into the archducal family? The answer had to do with the educational philosophy that reigned in Yurgenschmidt. Archduke candidates studied a different course from other nobles, specially designed to help them properly rule their land. An aub of the past had decided that this knowledge would also prove important to those who became giebes.

Those who were educated as archduke candidates became giebes, but in Drewanchel, the title wasn't passed down hereditarily like it was in other duchies. The children of giebes would ultimately be prioritized to become a giebe themselves if they were adopted by the aub and managed to graduate, but those who weren't worthy of adoption wouldn't automatically receive the title.

I don't know whether to describe that as harsh or just tension-inducing...

At the very least, Drewanchel wasn't a duchy where one could be complacent. This was so true, in fact, that some archducal family members went out of their way to be adopted by an archnoble following their graduation so that they could move to the comparatively more relaxing Sovereignty and focus on their research.

There's Professor Gundolf, for example. Our dormitory supervisor.

He was the current aub's uncle and one of only two people in the dormitory whom I couldn't defy. The other was my sister, which was why I had no choice but to trudge over to the meeting room when summoned.

Still, where did this feeling that I can't go against my sister come from? Was it implanted in me from birth? Sigh.

Upon entering the meeting room, I found my sister in the midst of a very serious-looking conversation with her retainers, touching her wavy, wine-red hair all the while. I sensed that she was going to say something truly bothersome and was struck with the urge to turn around on the spot... but I stood my ground nonetheless. After being summoned and coming all this way, I couldn't just leave without saying a word. No, I had another idea—one that would be even more bothersome than whatever she was about to say. For now, I decided to speak in a low voice, hoping that she wouldn't hear me.

"You called, Sister?" I whispered. My intention was to leave if she didn't notice me, but notice me she did.

"Your voice is as weak as ever," she said as she gestured me over. I could tell from her tone that she intended to chastise me, but there was a distinct sparkle in her amber eyes. "You saw it, didn't you, Ortwin? The hairpins and glossy hair of those Ehrenfest girls! They must intend to push those as trends this term. Don't you agree?"

It seemed that my sister was completely enchanted, but I couldn't say that I was particularly interested myself. I *did* want to know what they were using for their hair and what the product was made of, but only out of curiosity; I wasn't passionate about it like she was.

To be honest, I think improving rejuvenation potions is a lot more interesting...

I kept this thought to myself, of course. I never voiced my dissent in situations like this, because it would only make my sister emotional and ten times more unreasonable. From there, she had a tendency to entangle me in a web of words.

"Now, now! Stay alert, Ortwin. If you slack too much, you may be beaten by that Ehrenfest archduke candidate. You know that their written grades have been climbing steadily for some time now, correct?"

"Ehrenfest? Beating me?" I asked. "Not the girl from Dunkelfelger?"

Sister was giving me a teasing smirk, but it wasn't at all in good taste. I was a Drewanchel archduke candidate; I couldn't imagine losing to someone from the thirteenth-ranked duchy, even if it did have a somewhat skilled archduke candidate or two.

"Well, however unlikely it is for you to lose to Ehrenfest, do whatever it takes to beat Lady Hannelore of Dunkelfelger. You will need to propose to her eventually, and it would be quite awkward for you to have worse grades when you do," Adolphine said, thrusting a pointer finger my way.

"Huh...?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I was well aware that

Lady Hannelore was my greatest rival when it came to coming first-in-class, but not once had I thought about proposing to her. Had my sister hit her head or something?

"Lady Hannelore is the child of her duchy's first wife, so if you can get in with her, you are all but guaranteed to become the next aub," she explained.

Drewanchel was the third-ranked duchy, with the only two ranked above it being Dunkelfelger and Klassenberg. Lady Eglantine was already set to marry royalty, meaning there was no chance of an engagement with any of my half-brothers. My sister was convinced that Lady Hannelore was the best candidate for getting me into the aub seat.

"But I have no intention of becoming the aub," I said with a glare, not wanting her to decide whom I would marry. She wasn't my father, after all. "I find research more enjoyable anyway."

"Oh my..." Adolphine blinked several times, curious. "But it has already been decided that I must marry either Prince Sigiswald or Prince Anastasius—whomever Lady Eglantine does not choose, no? That leaves you to become the aub. I could not rest easy if one of our half-brothers came to rule the duchy instead; I cannot count on them to support me."

You just want me at your beck and call, even after I'm the aub. I don't think so.

My sister Adolphine was highly respected both within the duchy and in the Royal Academy. She was a serious student with excellent grades and a trustworthy, diligent personality—but that was just her public image. On the inside, she was a completely different beast. I really, *really* wanted everyone else to understand how I felt being dragged around by her... but at the same time, I could see why she was so concerned. Anyone would rather have a closer family member in power.

"In any case, all eyes will be on Ehrenfest this year," Adolphine said. "They even have two archduke candidates in the same grade. They're first-years and soon to be your classmates. Learn all that you can about them, Ortwin."

"I understand the importance of gathering intelligence, Sister."

Soon after I made such a confident declaration, Lady Rozemyne returned to Ehrenfest. My head spun when I overheard Lord Wilfried and Lady Hannelore talking about it during schtappe class.

Lady Rozemyne had produced so many things that were bound to become future trends, only to return home as soon as she finished her classes; what kind of archduke candidate did that?

The hairpins and glossy hair stuff were supposed to be marketed to girls, right? Then why did she go home?! If she wants to be the next aub as an adopted daughter, this is her best chance!

I was so confused that I started to panic internally. It was said that adopted children struggled to become aubs in Ehrenfest, so perhaps Lady Rozemyne had been instructed to give all the credit for her achievements to Lord Wilfried, the biological son of the archduke.

No, wait... If that were the case, she would have been told to get middling grades as well. Hold on. I remember hearing that Lord Ferdinand, the Genius of Ehrenfest, came first-in-class every single year despite not wanting to be the next aub.

I thought back to the man whom Professor Gundolf called "the lonely genius created by overwhelming misfortune." He was a savant of sorts who had produced new magic tools one after another, but he had no mother to speak of and had been despised by his aub's first wife. Apparently, his genius was born precisely because he had nowhere in his home duchy to rest easy.

I'm getting distracted. Calm down, me.

Right now, I needed to focus on how to get intelligence from Ehrenfest. My sister had told me to learn more about the duchy, but she hadn't said that I needed to befriend Lady Rozemyne in particular. Ehrenfest had another archduke candidate: Lord Wilfried. I could bond with him and get intelligence that way.

Lady Rozemyne was on another level, having managed to pass almost every class and practical lesson she was attending on the first day, but Lord Wilfried wasn't so bad either—especially considering his duchy's rank. He had finished his mana control class before anyone and was coming up with trends that were easily adoptable, such as making schtappes with crests.

The drivable highbeasts that Lady Rozemyne introduced are groundbreaking without a doubt, but they require so much mana that not everyone can use them.

Of the two Ehrenfest archduke candidates, Lord Wilfried seemed like the easier choice to befriend.

"In short, Sister, I've been talking to Lord Wilfried during class, and the two of us are on good terms," I said, having been summoned to a meeting room to report on my findings thus far. "You may still struggle to invite Lady Rozemyne to one of your tea parties, though."

Adolphine shook her head. "Listen, Ortwin... If you're going to be friends with either of them, pick Lady Rozemyne. She is a monster of a first-year. Despite having missed two very crucial years of development to a jureve, she has introduced many impactful trends and is almost guaranteed to come first-in-class. It boggles the mind, really."

"You think she's the most likely to win too, huh?"

"Doesn't come as much of a surprise, does it? I doubted my hearing when Professor Gundolf mentioned her scores. How can a child know so much?"

Adolphine was blinking her amber eyes in surprise as she recalled the memory, but I had accepted the reality of my situation long ago. As things stood, I couldn't believe that anyone expected me to come first-in-class; Lady Rozemyne was simply unrivaled. During lessons, her answers to questions were founded not in what she had been taught thus far or what her professors sought from her, but in her own personal experiences—not to be contrarian to the academic system, but because she knew no better responses. Perhaps it was fate that the disciple of a genius would be a genius herself.

"The fact that you acknowledge her extraordinary intelligence makes this easier," my sister said. "I cannot imagine it being a struggle for you to marry a girl from Ehrenfest. And would she not make for the most stimulating partner, regardless of whether you wish to become the aub or focus on your research?"

Stimulating? I guess trying to figure her out is pretty interesting...

I wasn't entirely sure what my sister meant, but I had an idea. Lady Rozemyne was abnormal in more than a few ways. It was hard to describe, but it almost felt like she was from an entirely different world from everyone else—like what she saw and felt were rooted in something incomparable to what the rest of us were used to. Because I couldn't understand what Lady Rozemyne was thinking or why she acted as she did, she just seemed... uncanny. She was less "stimulating" and more just kind of creepy.

"She returned to her home duchy before I got the chance to speak with her personally," I said, "but I will consider taking action next year."

If I feel like it.

"Lord Wilfried seems to be attending various tea parties, but he is primarily socializing with Dunkelfelger and Ahrensbach, correct?" Adolphine asked. "That will limit the intelligence we can gather for some time."

It was true that Lord Wilfried was only socializing with duchies aligned with Dunkelfelger and Ahrensbach. As these were duchies with weak connections to Drewanchel, my sister was unable to attend.

"Perhaps we could invite him to a Drewanchel tea party now that you have made friends with him in class..." Adolphine pondered aloud.

"We can't do that, can we? I sent him an invitation to play gewinnen just yesterday, in the name of gathering my fellow first-year male archduke candidates together to practice before socializing begins. So far, the replies have been positive, but there are only four of us. Would you like to join, Sister?"

Gewinnen was a version of ditter played on a board. It was very popular during male socializing events, but it was enjoyed by female archduke candidates as well, since it was essential for future aubs to understand reports regarding their duchy's defenses and the plans of their Knight's Order. Incidentally, my sister beat me consistently. Perhaps there was a trend where the worse your personality was, the better you were at ditter.

"I will refrain," Adolphine replied, albeit after a hesitant pause. "When men play gewinnen, they always end up focusing more on the game than on exchanging information; it is a boorish waste of time. Not to mention, you are playing with first-years, no? Their boyish hearts would surely be crushed if a woman like me dominated them and ground them into dust. I would rather not wound them so."

Wait... Is my sister actually being considerate of male pride? She's refraining from grinding the others into dust? Wow. I don't think I've ever seen this side of her.

"I will focus on having tea parties with Lady Eglantine," Adolphine concluded. "That will be much more productive."

"Ah, I'm pretty sure Lady Rozemyne had a tea party with Lady Eglantine before returning to Ehrenfest," I said, conveying what I had heard from my scholars. "Perhaps meeting with Klassenberg would indeed be faster."

Adolphine gave a curt nod, having already known this. "According to Lady Eglantine, although Lady Rozemyne left so soon, she socialized with Prince Anastasius as well."

"Really? I didn't know that... Oh, speaking of which—something seems to have happened between Lady Rozemyne and Dunkelfelger. Lady Hannelore was hinting at it recently." I was feeling a bit defiant after being shown up by my sister.

"Ortwin," Adolphine said, a glint in her amber eyes, "Lady Rozemyne has socialized to some degree with Klassenberg, Dunkelfelger, and even members of royalty. Do you care to explain why nothing has happened between her and Drewanchel, perhaps?"

Are you trying to say this is my fault?!

A chill ran down my spine; her tone had suddenly darkened, and she was now twisting her hair around her finger in a show of annoyance. This wasn't good. It wasn't good at all. There was one thought on my mind—*Prince Anastasius and Lady Eglantine socialized with her despite being of a higher grade, so is this not your fault too?*—but I dared not say it aloud. I could only imagine what she would do to me.

"I will ask Lord Wilfried to negotiate with his aub about having Lady Rozemyne return posthaste, such that we may hold a tea party with her," I said to my sister. This way, while Lord Wilfried and I played gewinnen, she and Lady Rozemyne could discuss trends.

Adolphine thought for a moment, then sighed and nodded. "Ehrenfest has been serving never-before-seen sweets during tea parties. You could at least learn more about them or even bring some back with you, no?"

"Right," I said. "I will suggest that he bring sweets with him to gewinnen."

My request for Ehrenfest to bring sweets had only been made to cool my sister's anger, but in any case, I succeeded in getting some "pound cake" brought to our game of gewinnen. I had informed my attendant ahead of time to save some for my sister, and when my socializing was over, I called Adolphine to a meeting room for a small tea party. She looked over the sweet from various angles, then picked up her cutlery.

"It certainly has a... rustic look to it," she said.

"According to Wilfried, it is served with cream, honey, and fruit during tea parties, such that one can eat it with their preferred flavors."

"Lady Adolphine, we can prepare the honey and cream at once," one of my sister's attendants said considerately.

Adolphine nodded curtly and asked them to do just that, then turned her attention back to me. "Still, to think you and Lord Wilfried became so close after just one game of gewinnen. You said that was all it took for you to speak frankly and address each other without formalities?" she asked.

I paused; I certainly couldn't reveal that we had bonded over our mutual exhaustion from attending tea parties with girls—or in my case, with one girl in particular.

"I quite enjoy gewinnen when I can actually win," I eventually said. "Not to mention, it was not just Wilfried; I also became friends with Lord Konradin of Gaussbuttel and Lord Dahvidh of Lindenthal."

Whenever I played with Adolphine, the outcome was always the same: my inevitable defeat. At least against Wilfried, I could normally win as long as I didn't let my guard down. Dahvidh was considerably easier to beat, to the point that I hadn't lost a single game against him, but Konradin was more complicated. I won against him, but I felt that he was letting me win. Maybe he didn't want to stick out too much, since he was the son of a third wife.

"Pay close attention so that you can detect whether he is simply appeasing you," my sister warned when I explained the situation. Our conversation was cut short when a plate neatly decorated with cream and honey was placed before her, and she immediately took a bite of the provided pound cake. "My, my... This is rustic no more. And as for the taste... Not bad in the least. I feel confident in saying that I prefer this to Ahrensbach's balls of sugar."

"According to Wilfried, Lady Rozemyne is a gourmand when it comes to delicious food. She has her personal chefs experimenting with new recipes almost all the time. This so-called 'puh-lein' flavor is the most basic form, and in truth, there are many others to choose from."

"Many others...?" Adolphine repeated, looking intently at the pound cake on her plate as if she didn't understand me. "Ortwin, when will Lady Rozemyne be returning? Did Lord Wilfried say anything?"

"He said that her return is being decided by the aub and her guardians, and that had it been up to him, Lady Rozemyne would have been back by now. He, too, is urgently awaiting her return."

Wilfried was receiving more invitations than he could deal with, and the army of girls wanting to know more about Ehrenfest hairpins was only continuing to grow. I didn't envy him at all—in fact, he had my utmost sympathy, having to promote trends for girls originally meant to be promoted by a female archduke candidate all on his own.

"Just what is Aub Ehrenfest thinking...?" my sister wondered aloud. "How does he gain from not spreading trends at such a crucial moment, when everyone is interested in them? If marketing them truly is his intention, he has no choice but to return Lady Rozemyne swiftly or otherwise have Lord Wilfried play a more active role in tea parties..."

"I shall convey your thoughts to Wilfried as a warning from a top-ranking duchy. Perhaps Aub Ehrenfest might then reconsider his position," I replied, thinking back to my conversation with Wilfried. He had kept saying that he wanted Lady Rozemyne to return, but he didn't seem too enthusiastic about it.

"Rozemyne causes problems even when she's not here," he had said, a distant look in his eyes, "and who knows what disaster she'll inevitably cause when she comes back. I understand how Father feels."

At the time, I hadn't understood what would drive him to say that, but it turned out that Lady Rozemyne stirred the pot more often than one would imagine from someone with her youthful appearance. A shudder had run down my spine as Wilfried started listing off all the problems she had caused—and those were just the ones that had taken place in class. It was easy to imagine that she was causing even more trouble elsewhere.

Marrying Lady Rozemyne? I can't imagine it. Nope. Not me.

I didn't want to marry someone who was somehow even more bothersome than my sister. And for that reason, I immediately removed Lady Rozemyne from my list of viable marriage candidates.

The Interduchy Tournament was on the horizon, which meant socializing season was coming to an end. I was busy focusing on my preparations for the upcoming event when I received a summons from my sister.

I entered the meeting room that I was asked to go to and inhaled sharply when I saw that it was clear of retainers. Adolphine very rarely held such private talks. The last time we had attended a family discussion without retainers like this was when her marriage to royalty had been decided internally without her input. I still remembered her crying.

"If they need a Drewanchel woman for their political marriage, won't any other archduke candidate do?" she had asked.

"You were chosen because you are the daughter of my first wife, Adolphine. You must understand."

"I do. I understand that only my status matters, not my own thoughts, dreams, or hard work."

My sister hated it when her worth was determined not by her own power, but by her age, status, and her duchy's ranking. She had wanted to win the seat of aub with her own two hands, not be married off to a prince. That said, while it was now set in stone that she would marry a royal, it was not decided which prince she would take. It was an insulting scenario where Klassenberg's Lady Eglantine would pick the next king, while Sister would be left with whoever lost.

Of course, Adolphine had no choice but to accept the situation —that much was inevitable for a political marriage. This was an important union that would bind Drewanchel to royalty, and as the order was coming from Aub Drewanchel himself, there was no escaping it.

It was afterward that she started incessantly prodding me about becoming the next aub.

Apparently, Lady Eglantine was a former princess whose family had been assassinated during the civil war. The previous Aub Klassenberg had allied with the current king in retaliation, hoping to avenge her and return her to royalty.

Lady Eglantine had been on the winning side of the war, but her family's assassination meant she was still sensitive to conflict. She would most likely choose the older Prince Sigiswald, then. Everyone knew that Prince Anastasius was head over heels for her, but choosing him would inevitably lead to fighting. Adolphine had told me all this with a defeated expression that showed she was resigned to marrying Prince Anastasius.

So, what happened this time, then?

"Sister...?" I said.

She didn't say anything in response, which was an unsettling first. Instead, she held out a sound-blocking magic tool, her expression hard and her lips pressed together in a thin line. I accepted it, feeling nervous.

"It seems that Lady Eglantine has chosen Prince Anastasius," Adolphine said. "It came up confidentially in today's tea party."

"Prince Anastasius? Does that mean he's going to be the next king? It's rare for your prediction to be wrong like that, Sis—"

"No, Prince Sigiswald is still taking the throne. Prince Anastasius gave up his claim to prove that his love for Lady Eglantine is pure—to prove that he is not marrying her to become king."

"What...?"

The very idea was baffling. Lady Eglantine had more royal blood coursing through her veins, and the future stability of the country depended on her birthing successors. Wasn't that why Adolphine had been forced into the humiliating and agonizing situation of taking an undecided partner?

"This is the result of Prince Sigiswald obsessing over the throne, while Prince Anastasius obsessed over Lady Eglantine," my sister continued. "It seems that Lady Eglantine pleaded with her family, saying that she did not want to ignore Prince Anastasius's feelings, but that she also did not wish to cause war by accepting them."

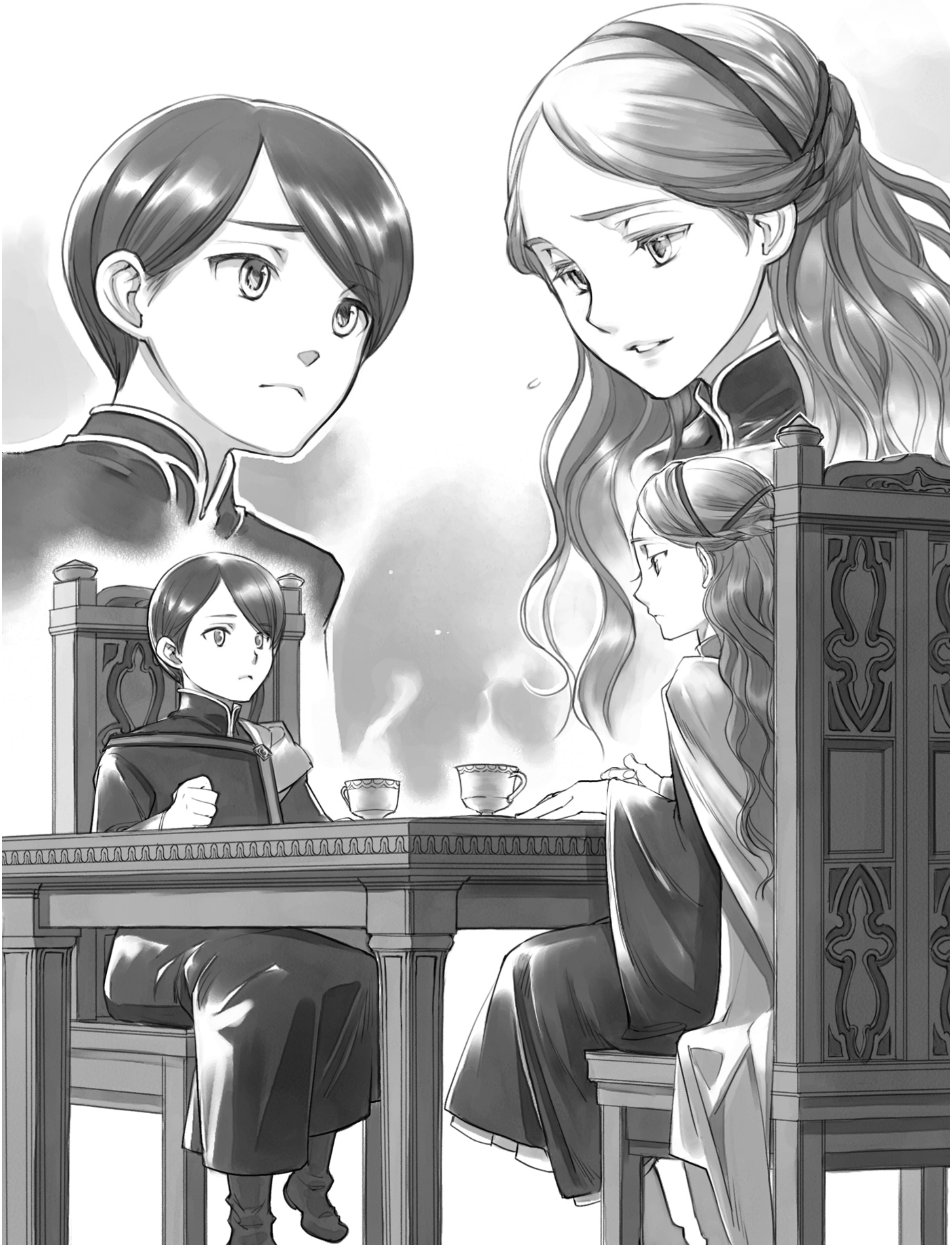
And so, Prince Sigiswald got the throne, Prince Anastasius got the woman he loved, and Lady Eglantine got peace. They were all set to live happily ever after.

"You said that you would feel terrible marrying Prince Anastasius knowing that he loves Lady Eglantine, Sister, so is this not perhaps a boon of sorts? As you are marrying Prince Sigiswald, you will now be the first wife of the next king."

"If only things were so simple..." Adolphine said, her usual triumphant self now completely replaced with a dark and clouded expression. "Prince Sigiswald cares deeply for Lady Nahelache. He was bound to treat Lady Eglantine well no matter how little she meant to him, since she was absolutely necessary for his becoming king... but what about me?"

"Well, this is a political marriage. I cannot imagine royalty mistreating Drewanchel the Third," I said. Lady Eglantine was on another level, but it was unthinkable that my older sister would be neglected. I told her that she was overthinking things.

“Yes, you are surely right. He will treat me as a normal fiancée from this point onward,” she said with a weak smile, and it was only then that I realized something—not once had my sister received any special treatment from her potential suitors. Both princes had sent Lady Eglantine gifts and honeyed proposals in the hope of winning her heart or the throne, but neither had done anything for Adolphine. She was being treated as though she were just any other noble.



As my sister was not yet officially engaged to either prince, it was not an absolute requirement that they greet her or send her gifts... but surely they could have shown her some consideration while she was stuck waiting for Lady Eglantine to make her decision.

"Everything will change for the better once you are formally engaged," I said, putting aside the anger that was boiling up inside of me and instead attempting to cheer up my sister. She gave a half-hearted giggle and another weak smile, then let out a heavy sigh.

"I will surely be compared to Lady Eglantine from now on, no matter what I do. And not only that, but I will also have to stand above a former princess-turned-archduke candidate from Klassenberg the First—a girl who regularly came first-in-class. I never expected to become the next king's first wife; this surprise is most unpleasant. I cannot help but feel that my future is bleak."

Had the position instead gone to Lady Eglantine, then Adolphine would have had no qualms about supporting her. It was the same thing she had always done: propping up Klassenberg the First. However, these expected roles were now in reverse, with Adolphine being the next king's first wife, and Lady Eglantine being the first wife of a regular prince. I could only imagine the immense pressure that my sister was feeling.

"I will aid you in any way I can," I mumbled. The words had escaped me without a second thought when I saw how caught up my sister was in thoughts about her future.

"Lord Ortwin, a summons from Lady Adolphine," a scholar announced. "She is waiting in the usual meeting room."

"Ah, she's back from Ehrenfest's tea party already?" I replied, standing up at once. "That was fast."

Lady Rozemyne had returned to the Royal Academy right at the end of socializing season. I had wondered what she would do, since she didn't have the time to hold many tea parties, and it turned out that she had decided to roll them all into one and host a single tea party that all duchies were invited to. This gathering had taken place today.

I wanted to attend myself, but my sister had snapped up the single Drewanchel seat before anyone else got the chance. The other archduke candidates had all come at her with their claws out, but she had made no move to relinquish her grip on the opportunity. She had even said that it would benefit the duchy most for a future royal such as herself to attend.

An important part of this tea party is going to be Lady Eglantine introducing her, since they have a personal connection.

Rumor was that Lady Rozemyne had also used her time to respond to invitations from Prince Anastasius and Lady Eglantine. Many were dying to know why both of them thought speaking to the young Ehrenfest girl was so important; she must have done something for them to value her so much.

“You seem to be in a good mood, Sister. I assumed you would be gone for longer,” I said upon finding Adolphine waiting for me, her expression the complete opposite of what I had seen previously. She was sniffing the contents of a jar with a broad smile across her face.

“Lady Rozemyne fell unconscious during the tea party,” Adolphine explained, “so it was brought to an abrupt and early close.”

“Uh... what?”

I couldn’t even understand what might make someone collapse midway through a tea party. All one had to do was sit and talk; what was so draining about this that one would faint?

“She is so weak and sickly that I now see why Aub Ehrenfest was so hesitant about returning her to the Royal Academy,” my sister said. “Those of Ehrenfest carried her away with noticeably practiced movements, indicating that this is a common occurrence back in their home duchy. They had their hands quite full consoling the disturbed guests as well. She collapsed right in front of Lady Hannelore, who turned so pale that I honestly feel sympathy for her.”

Yeah, the blood would drain from my face too...

If not dealt with correctly, such an incident could result in an interduchy scandal and an inquiry into whether it counted as an attempted assassination. Wilfried had been completely right in saying that Lady Rozemyne’s return would only lead to even more problems.

Now I’m glad that I didn’t go in the end.

I didn’t want to endure such a stressful-sounding tea party. My heart was way too sensitive—unlike that of my sister, who was busy summarizing the whole experience as a tremendous positive.

"Grimace if you must, Ortwin, but it was a *truly* stimulating tea party. I tasted many different kinds of pound cake and succeeded in securing some rinsham."

Adolphine thrust the jar into my hands with a cackle. Rinsham was a liquid that made one's hair glossy, apparently, and it was to be used when washing one's hair in the bath. I peered inside the jar and saw a somewhat thick, white liquid that smelled of apfelsige.

"I imagine there are many other smells of this as well," I said.

"Indeed. She mentioned that she had prepared bottles of the kind she gave to Lady Eglantine before."

First pound cake, now rinsham... It seemed that Lady Rozemyne wasn't the type of person who was satisfied with just one type of something. It would probably be easier to deduce how the product was made if we compared the kinds that were available. I put a drop of the rinsham on my finger, smelled it, then smeared it around with my thumb. I could already tell that it contained a lot of oil.

Some kind of soap, maybe?

"Research that and make something of the same kind, Ortwin."

"What?"

"I wish to have some of my own. You are curious as well, and would it not be delightful to produce this in our own duchy? You will no doubt end up one step closer to coming first-in-class next year."

My sister's tone made it clear that she wasn't going to accept no for an answer. I gazed up and saw that she was pointing a declarative finger at me—a clear indicator that she considered this an order, not a request.

"I'm not sure reproducing this has anything to do with my grades..." I said.

"Giving you such a delightful research topic is my way of showing my love for you as your older sister. Do your best, dear brother," she replied. Then, she left without warning, having said all that she wanted to say. She had opted to leave the jar with me, of course.

I don't want love like that! I never should have worried about you in the first place!

Hannelore — Ehrenfest's Books

I sent Lady Rozemyne a get-well message after she collapsed at the tea party, but no positive news came back to me. In the end, I spent about three days sick with worry about her well-being before the Interduchy Tournament began.

The Interduchy Tournament was the busiest event of the Royal Academy and the day when Dunkelfelger was more united and riled up than ever. One could tell how enthusiastic we were just by the fact that almost every knight in the duchy came to watch, save for the bare minimum needed for communication. It was very stifling.

On the morning of, I went downstairs to prepare and saw the knights who had teleported over drinking vize and trying to rouse the apprentice knights. The dining hall already stank of alcohol. I furrowed my brow on instinct, at which point the knight commander spotted me and broke into a smile. He looked so young that it was hard to believe he was in his mid-forties.

"Oho, Lady Hannelore! Good morning!" he exclaimed. "I hear you defeated Lord Ferdinand's disciple the other day."

I shook my head as fervently as I could and said, "Th-That's not true, commander. I did nothing of the sort."

It must have been my brother who told him this nonsense.

Despite my best efforts to explain what really happened, my voice didn't reach anyone. Heisshitze, the knight commander's nephew and an archknight, even started praising me, saying it was an impressive feat to have defeated a disciple of *the* Lord Ferdinand. His praise made the other knights join in, and soon enough, they were all cheering my name. It was an enormous misunderstanding and awful slander against Lady Rozemyne.

"I-I simply wished to be friends with Lady Rozemyne. She is very..."

I wanted to say "sickly and faints often," but before the words could even leave my mouth, Heisshitze gave a firm nod of agreement. "Ditter makes the greatest friends out of your greatest enemies," he said. "I am glad you understand this as well, Lady

Hannelore."

"That is not what I meant..."

Heisshitze viewed Lord Ferdinand as quite the rival, having been in the same grade as the Master Tactician of Ehrenfest. They had competed at every opportunity since their third year, when they could start participating in ditter games, and Heisshitze had always ended up losing. Those who spoke of their exploits at times used the word "frenemies" to describe them, apparently.

Am I the only one under the impression that Lord Ferdinand thinks nothing of Heisshitze?

"Father, Uncle," came the voice of an apprentice archknight—the second son of the knight commander, "we were no match for Lady Rozemyne. She utterly trounced us with her plots, but when she claimed victory, she did not boast; rather, she praised how coordinated we were during our battle."

"Oho. That is interesting... Lord Ferdinand's disciple managed all that? I simply cannot wait for the Interduchy Tournament now. Tell me, what schemes did she employ?"

The apprentice archknight eagerly began to explain, while all the knights in earshot listened with much interest.

Incidentally, Heisshitze's and the knight commander's wives were sisters with an age gap, and while Heisshitze and the apprentice archknight were actually cousins, their relationship was more that of an uncle and nephew. This was all to better keep the hotheaded Knight's Order under control.

I turned my back on the discussion and swiftly exited the dining hall, not wanting to listen to yet another retelling of Lady Rozemyne's plots. I was so familiar with the story by this point that I could practically recite it verbatim.

I never intended to defeat Lady Rozemyne. Not once!

Heisshitze and the knight commander had both been looking forward to seeing Lady Rozemyne at the Interduchy Tournament, but she had ended up not attending so that she could rest. She had apparently regained consciousness last night but was still too unwell to move.

To think she was absent despite coming first-in-class... Perhaps, like me, she lacks the divine protection of Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time.

"Lady Rozemyne came first-in-class, and she has the mind of a plotter..." the knight commander mused aloud. "Is it just me, or would she make a perfect wife for Lord Lestilaut?"

"Hm. Agreed," Heisshitze replied. I could only hope that our duchy would one day look beyond strength and scheming as the most desirable traits for an archduke's wife.

"Father, Uncle, I'm sorry to say that Lord Lestilaut and Lady Rozemyne did not seem to be on particularly good terms," the apprentice archknight noted.

"That's fine," Heisshitze said. "As long as they keep playing ditter together, they'll come to understand each other for sure. Just like Lord Ferdinand and I did."

I had heard that Heisshitze had given his Dunkelfelger cape to someone as proof of his defeat. Perhaps that someone was Lord Ferdinand.

Lady Rozemyne was absent for the graduation ceremony the next day, but she at least seemed to recover after that. I sent her a letter expressing my thoughts, and soon after, Ehrenfest lent me a book.

"This book..." I said, feeling the blood drain from my face as Cordula handed it to me. "Cordula... Could it be that Lady Rozemyne knows I am not too fond of reading?"

"You are overthinking things, milady. She addressed you as a book-loving friend at the tea party, so I find it highly unlikely that she knows."

"I-Is that so?"

I was still worried, despite my head attendant's reassurance. It seemed to me that Lady Rozemyne would only lend me such a thin book if she thought I would be unable to read thicker ones.

"Milady, it is best to stay optimistic when considering these things; embracing pessimism will see you trapped in a never-ending spiral of negative thoughts. This book is thin enough that even you should not struggle to read it all, and if you pay close attention to its content, you should find it easy to discuss it with her."

"That is true..." I replied, accepting Cordula's encouragement. I picked up Lady Rozemyne's book and noticed that it had no cover; instead, the front page was made of unusual paper that seemed to have real flowers in it. "This paper is fairly white and thin, unlike the paper we normally use. It even seems to smell different..."

"Perhaps that is Ehrenfest paper," Cordula suggested. "I seem to recall the apprentice scholars saying that Ehrenfest students are using some new kind."

It seemed that even paper was strange in Ehrenfest. I opened the book and started flipping through it when—"Oh my!"—I cried out despite myself.

"What is it, milady?"

"This book is written in modern vernacular. It is very easy to read."

Dunkelfelger books were so old and often used such complicated vocabulary that trying to decipher them was a time-consuming ordeal. Lady Rozemyne's book, in contrast, was simple enough that even someone as inexperienced with reading as I could breeze through it.

The contents were what I had requested as well: knight stories centered around romance. They were entirely unlike Dunkelfelger knight stories, and each made my heart throb as though I were listening to a minstrel. Accompanying the text were wonderful pictures showing scenes such as a handsome knight fighting for the female archduke candidate he loved and offering a feystone to propose to her. This book couldn't even be compared to the Dunkelfelger tomes consisting of nothing but letters!

"I can hold the book in one hand, its pages are easy to turn, the language is modern and straightforward... To think that reading could be so enjoyable. I think I understand why Lady Rozemyne fell in love with such a hobby; had I been born in Ehrenfest, perhaps I would not have such a distaste for it."

I wrote my thoughts on the book in a letter, and for the first time in my life, I actually wanted to read another. I was struck with the feeling that I would never tire of reading Ehrenfest books, no matter how many there were.

"I am overjoyed to see you so enthusiastic about reading, milady, but did you not promise to lend a book to Ehrenfest in return?" Cordula asked. She was right, and that realization snapped me back to reality. I needed to choose a book for Lady Rozemyne to borrow, but I didn't even know what books Dunkelfelger had.

"What should we do, Cordula? Do we have any books fit to lend to Ehrenfest, a duchy of such high literary status?"

"Perhaps you could ask your family."

The graduation ceremony was over, but my parents were still in the dormitory; they were due to return to Dunkelfelger tomorrow. I picked up Lady Rozemyne's book, exited my room, and started down the hall, hoping to explain that we were lending Ehrenfest a book in return for the one that Lady Rozemyne had lent me.

Dunkelfelger was a duchy that prioritized practicality above all else, so our dormitory and castle were sparsely decorated. Vast expanses of white were broken up only by things colored blue for our duchy, and since this dormitory was only ever used in the winter, it had an exceedingly cold feel to it.

"If only Dunkelfelger had a greater flair for the artistic..." I said. "The dormitory would feel a little warmer if we at least had some sculptures, or if our duchy's color were red."

"This dormitory was constructed many generations before buildings were decorated with statues and the like, so that cannot be helped," Cordula noted. "If you are so concerned, perhaps you could decorate it yourself, milady?"

Whenever other duchies invited me to tea parties, I tended to be overwhelmed by the fanciness of the decorations. I truly loved admiring it all, but when it came to the actual decorating process, I had no idea where to start or how to bring everything together. Memories of my fervent battle to redecorate my room immediately came to mind. Everything had ended up a disjointed mess, and not even three days later, I had simply put everything back to the way it had been before.

"You know I cannot do that, Cordula. You are so mean."

"I see no harm in making an attempt nonetheless. Just as you found a book that you can read, perhaps you will find decorations that suit you."

"Well, well," Father said. "You certainly seem to be in a good mood today, Hannelore." He beckoned me over when he noticed me enter the parlor, having been discussing something with Mother and Lestilaut.

"Father, Mother. Lady Rozemyne of Ehrenfest lent me this book," I said. "It was a pleasure to read, and now I wish to read other Ehrenfest books as well."

"Oh my. You wish to read, my dear Hannelore?" Mother asked. "How rare."

"You should read it too, Mother. It's a very wonderful collection of knight stories." I walked over to her with the book clutched affectionately to my chest.

"Ehrenfest knight stories?" Brother said, making no attempt to hide his grimace. “I trust that the knights in question aren’t uncouth villains who make their way through devious plots.”

“No, Brother. These stories are of wonderful knights and grand romances.”

“Love stories, then? How weak...” he said with a derisive sniff. I turned my back to him and presented the book to Mother, who shared in my initial surprise and examined it carefully.

“This is a book?”

“Indeed. Lady Rozemyne lent it to me herself, so it is unmistakably an Ehrenfest book. It is thin, light, and very easy to read.”

“Hah. Is their duchy incapable of something as simple as creating a proper cover?” Lestilaut asked. Mother shooed him away at once and started skimming the book.

“This certainly is easy to read,” Mother eventually said. “The language is modern and uncomplicated, and the book is even filled with beautiful illustrations.”

“Ehrenfest must have been formed too recently to have any books written in proper language,” my brother interjected. “How pitiful. They do not even have a history.”

“Lestilaut, I am talking with Hannelore right now. Could you quiet down?” Mother said with a smile, silencing him. “They must have hired an exceptionally skilled transcriptionist; the handwriting is beautiful and almost suspiciously consistent. You could learn much from them, Hannelore. That said... This paper certainly is unusual. It feels different from any I have touched before.”

“It is called Ehrenfest paper, and to my knowledge, it was only recently invented,” I explained. “I am told that their apprentice scholars have been using it at the Royal Academy this year.”

“I see...” Mother gazed down at the book without another word, as if deep in thought.

“Ehrenfest books are new and wonderful, are they not? I promised Lady Rozemyne that I would lend her a book in return.” I turned to my father. “She said that she wishes to read Dunkelfelger knight stories, but what should we give her?”

Lestilaut’s eyes gleamed. “This is a good opportunity to show that fake saint what a real book is like. We should give her a proper volume—not something shoddy and cheap like the one she gave us.”

“Hm.” Father paused for a moment to contemplate. “If this

Ehrenfest archduke candidate enjoys knightly tales, I do believe I have just the book for her."

"Truly, Father?!" I exclaimed.

Dunkelfelger was a duchy filled with strong knights, so we were second to none when it came to knight stories. If my father, the archduke himself, was recommending a book, then it was surely perfect.

The next day, Father returned to Dunkelfelger and then sent a large, single-volume book back through the teleporter. It was so massive that Lady Rozemyne would struggle just to open the cover, and if she was not careful, it was likely to crush her.

"What is Father thinking...?"

I compared this thick tome, which was pretty much a history textbook, to Lady Rozemyne's book. There was a wooden tag resting atop the cover of ours, which Cordula picked up and read.

"'Ehrenfest is competing with the new, so Dunkelfelger will compete with the old, which our opponents cannot replicate,'" Cordula said. "That is what is written."

"I did not wish to compete with Lady Rozemyne..."

Why is everyone so insistent on us becoming rivals? Is it not obvious at a glance that I can't compare in any regard? Lady Rozemyne came first-in-class. We aren't even on the same level.

Everyone around me seemed to be brimming with excitement, but I merely slumped my shoulders. Feeling thoroughly upset, I resigned myself to giving Lady Rozemyne this enormous book.

Of course, for me, this was easier said than done. Everyone from Ehrenfest had already returned to their duchy, and the door to their dormitory was now completely closed off. My scholars asked whether we should entrust our tome to one of the remaining Ehrenfest guards, but I weakly shook my head; valuable, expensive books needed to be delivered in person, not passed through intermediaries.

"Perhaps we could give the book to them at the Royal Academy next year," Cordula suggested. "Lady Rozemyne was the one to fall ill, so you will surely not be criticized for failing to deliver it."

"I suppose."

"Do not be so down, milady. Your timing was simply unfortunate." She was trying to console me, but I couldn't help but sigh.

I agreed to give Lady Rozemyne a book in turn, but she has already left. Why must my timing always be so pitiable?

In the end, I asked Cordula to put the book and a letter in a large, locked box used to store valuable books. Never in my wildest dreams did it occur to me that Father would happen across both prior to the Archduke Conference and give them to Aub Ehrenfest without consulting me.

Solange — Closed-Stack Archives and the Old Diaries

Several days had passed since the graduation ceremony's conclusion. Once the students had all returned to their duchies, and the Royal Academy was mostly empty, the library received almost no visitors. That didn't mean I was without work, however. After finishing breakfast, I brought Schwartz and Weiss to my office and started operating various magic tools. I could feel a gentle smile playing on my lips just from watching their ears flop around.

"This year truly was a fun one, thanks to Lady Rozemyne," I mused aloud. My life here had changed drastically thanks to that book-loving archduke candidate from Ehrenfest. Schwartz and Weiss had been given life once again, and then there was the tea party held in my office. "I was also the first one to hear a new song dedicated to Mestionora."

Not even pleading with the royal family directly about the state of the library had convinced them to assign more archnoble librarians here. It was unfortunate, but just having the opportunity to ask them was a big change for me.

"What work, Solange?"

"Same as yesterday?"

Lady Rozemyne had prepared feystones filled with mana for me, which would allow me to stay with Schwartz and Weiss until next winter. I nodded at them both and smiled, then opened the door to the reading room.

The bookcases of the reading room were packed with neatly lined-up books—a sight I still wasn't quite accustomed to. My usual routine had been to forlornly browse the half-empty shelves for books that I knew were missing and then send letters of complaint to the dormitory supervisors of the duchies that had taken them out. This year, however, things were completely different.

It is thanks to Lord Ferdinand that so many documents were returned.

Now that Schwartz and Weiss were operational again, their master Lady Rozemyne had used them to produce a list of those who had overdue books, then had Lord Ferdinand send ordonnanzes pressing for their return. This had proven so effective that the library had temporarily descended into a state of chaos as students came running with books clutched to their chests.

This mayhem had only been temporary, however; soon after Lady Rozemyne gleefully volunteered to help, the students had started to behave themselves. Archduke candidates were exceedingly powerful authority figures in the Royal Academy, since they were afforded opportunities to speak to the aubs of other duchies, and the offending students didn't want to risk getting in even more trouble. They were already in hot water for failing to return their books and, in some cases, removing them from the library without permission.

This year, the two shumils helped me check that the books were all in the right places and that we weren't missing anything. Because they had information on all the available resources, the whole process was completed dozens of times faster than I was used to—if not even quicker than that.

"First floor, finished."

"Time for second, Solange?"

"We will take care of the second floor in the autumn," I said.

Now that the students were gone, the professors could immerse themselves in their research. They would start accessing the second-floor documents on a more regular basis, so I tended to hold off on organizing them until autumn, before the school term began.

"I ask that you two clean the carrels. Once that is done, we will check the closed-stack archives. Goodness... How many years have passed since I last did that?" It was heartwarming to know that I finally had the time to do these things.

I went to fetch the key from the office, and when I returned, the door to the reading room creaked open. "Solange, I should like you to find some documents for me," said the visitor.

"Oh my. Professor Fraularm. Good evening. It is rare to see you here this late. What documents do you require?"

Fraularm was a professor of the scholar course, where she taught gathering information, taxonomy, and the like. One could say that scholars worked more closely with the library than did any other profession, but this was the first time that Fraularm had ever asked me to find documents for her.

“Do take me to one of those archives of yours,” she said. “I wish to learn more about the written lessons of Clemens, my predecessor.”

“Oh? Did you not say previously that you do not need to see them?”

It wasn’t unusual for a class’s syllabus to change dramatically when a new professor took charge. As one professor left, documents on their syllabus were either stored in one of our closed-stack archives if a new syllabus was being introduced, or left in the reading room for their successor if not. I had consulted Fraularm about what to do with them when she was first assigned to her role, and she had told me to put Clemens’s documents away, as she intended to teach entirely new lessons.

“I have grown used to teaching here in the Academy,” Fraularm said. “I believe now is a good time to review the work of my predecessor and adopt any good ideas that I might find.”

“That is truly splendid. There are many who struggle to obtain books after returning to their duchy, and upon coming of age, their daily workload prevents them from learning new things.”

“Indeed. These lessons are a precious opportunity. Rather than having the students focus on passing their exams on the first day, I am of the opinion that they should learn much and gain more knowledge,” Fraularm said passionately, her sharp voice ringing in my ears.

I could agree with her position that it was in the students’ best interests to learn as much as they could while in the Royal Academy. The content taught prior to the civil war was seen by the elderly as common sense, but as it was no longer being covered in lessons, the younger generations were more or less oblivious to it. Recent graduates were apparently struggling quite a lot, as they would start work only to discover that there was a significant gap of understanding between them and their senior coworkers.

“I am moved by your passionate spirit, Professor Fraularm, but the Third Archive where the documents are stored can generally only be entered by librarians. My sincerest apologies, but I must ask you to wait here in the reading room for a moment. I will return with them at once,” I explained. “Schwartz, Weiss, we are going to the Third Archive.”

And with that, I started walking down the hallway opposite my office, leaving Fraularm in the reading room.

In broad terms, there were three closed-stack archives in the Royal Academy's library. The First Archive was in the central building rather than the library itself, and to enter, one needed a key entrusted to the professor of the archduke candidate course by the royal family. Inside were documents and teaching materials used for the course, as well as magic tools best not seen by any non-archduke candidates. As a mednoble, I had never been inside myself; I simply had a copy of the key in my care.

The Second Archive had an entrance on the first floor of the library's reading room. It was for storing aged, rarely needed documents, and it had most recently been used by a group of students from Ehrenfest. They had wished to see old documents related to previous Interduchy Tournaments, so I readily obliged them. Students could enter this archive if accompanied by a librarian, but at the back was a door to another archive that only archnoble librarians could enter. There were records of members of royalty having used it as well.

Last of all was the Third Archive, my current destination.

At the end of the hallway was a wall engraved in Schutzaria's likeness. I opened up the feystone part at the center of her shield to reveal a keyhole, then stuck the key inside and turned it to reveal a door.

The room beyond was an empty white space containing a teleportation circle. Only Schwartz and Weiss could operate it, so in the past, whenever someone had asked me to access the archive, my response had been for them to ask royalty about making the two shumils operable again. Of course, nobody had ever done so; they feared incurring the royal family's wrath.

"Pray, Solange."

"O Mestionora, Goddess of Wisdom. O ye who seek all the wisdom in Yurgenschmidt. I offer up my learning as a guardian of knowledge. I seek your blessing to touch upon the knowledge that Schutzaria protects."

As I prayed, the bracelet I had been given upon becoming a librarian began to glow. At the same time, the feystones on Schwartz's and Weiss's heads shone with light, and a magic circle appeared a short distance above me. It slowly descended, and by the time it reached the floor, I was in one of the storage archives.

"How many years has it been since I was last here...?" I wondered aloud.

The Third Archive was where the documents and research results of those executed as political criminals were stored. Such resources would rest here until the wheel of time turned and they were needed once again. Among them were many exceedingly old and rare documents, but the archive was made such that they could not be taken out until a librarian confirmed that they would not be stolen by contemporary authorities or disposed of.

“Schwartz, Weiss, please look for Clemens’s documents,” I said. “Student-made lecture notes will do; I cannot yet take out his own personal documents.”

As the two shumils began their search, I started checking the magic tools in the archive. *The preservation magic tools in the reading room have stopped for mana-saving purposes, but these...* I thought back to the pained voices of the archnoble librarians who had once been my coworkers.

“Please, Solange. You will be the only guardian of knowledge left!”

“We don’t know how many of us will be purged. All we know is that you will surely be safe, since you are from Klassenberg. You must preserve as many documents and as much information as you can.”

“All these men and women who will ultimately be executed despite having committed no crimes... You must keep their memory alive and carry the knowledge they created to the future.”

It was right after the fifth prince won the civil war and was crowned the next king. Werkestock—a massive duchy that had allied with the fourth prince—had not been pleased with the results of the war and conspired to take the king’s life, driven by the belief that he would not be able to commit any wide-scale executions. Once he was dead, the throne could go only to the fourth prince, who had been imprisoned in an Ivory Tower. That was no doubt their goal.

Those from Klassenberg were infuriated when they found out about this plot, as the same mindset had resulted in the third prince being assassinated immediately after his victory. Soon after, the duchies that had allied with the fifth prince united to ensure that he was not soft on the losers. Because of their influence, it was decided that the fourth prince would be not just imprisoned, but executed as well. The winning duchies also began to discuss purging the losing duchies responsible for Yurgenschmidt's descent into chaos—starting with Werkestock.

The king had apparently voiced his concern on many occasions, stating that a purge on such a tremendous scale was too much. His supporters did not listen, however, and simply reminded him that his life was at stake. In the end, the king rethought his position when a group of rebels kidnapped his newborn daughter and threatened to take her life unless he surrendered the throne to the fourth prince.

Soon enough, even those who would normally have received a fine at most for being indirectly associated with the criminals were instead executed. It was a violent and terrifying time, and anyone who appealed to reason by saying that things were being taken too far was immediately suspected of colluding with Werkestock.

Werkestock's higher-ups were naturally executed, as were the archducal couple and their children for supporting the fourth prince. The purge then extended to those from Werkestock who had become citizens of other duchies through work or marriage. It even became a crime to accommodate those from Werkestock or exchange intelligence with them. The execution of the Royal Academy's archnoble librarians had taken place because of an incident where documents containing valuable intelligence were lent to Werkestock nobles.

In the first place, it most likely wasn't a librarian from the Royal Academy who lent out the ancient construction documents within the palace library... but the royals didn't care about that whatsoever.

The librarians had made no attempt to resist when they were told their fate; they had asked only for a few days to settle their affairs and prepare for their work to be handed over.

"We cannot allow the results of so many people's research to disappear forever, simply because they were born in the wrong duchy," they had said. "We must move as many documents to the Third Archive as we can, while we still have time."

The librarians did not weep; instead, they dryly accepted their executions and focused on getting the work of professors being executed and documents related to Werkestock into the Third Archive. Then, for my benefit, they drank as many rejuvenation potions as they could stomach and filled Schwartz and Weiss with as much mana as possible.

"We are guardians of knowledge; we offer the wisdom born in

Yurgenschmidt to Mestionora," they had said to me. "Solange, we leave the rest to you."

And then they were gone.

I remembered all this as I walked through the archive, then my eyes fell on a number of old diaries sitting on a shelf. They had been written by the executed librarians and were being kept here to ensure their preservation. I picked one up, feeling nostalgic.

"That too, Solange?"

"Another for Fraularm?"

"No, I intend to read this myself," I told the two shumils. "They are the diaries of other librarians..."

I made my way out of the Third Archive with the old diaries in hand, locked the door behind me, and then went straight to my office rather than the reading room. A morose smile crept onto my face as I put the key away and left the books on my desk; it felt as though the clock had turned back to a happier time.

"The reading room, Solange."

"Books to lend."

At the shumils' prompting, I returned to the reading room and delivered the study guides from the Third Archive to Fraularm.

"I expected more..." Fraularm said, her lips twisting into a dissatisfied frown as she thumbed through the resources. "Oh my! Are these not study guides written by students? Solange, I am specifically interested in the documents that *Clemens* left behind."

"Unfortunately, this is the most I can lend you," I replied. "He was executed for political crimes."

"Ah, so none of his documents remain. Very well. I shall take these." Fraularm handed the study guides to Schwartz, who then carried out the standard procedures for her to borrow them. I couldn't help but sigh in relief.

I returned to my office, having told Schwartz and Weiss that their work for the day would be over once they finished cleaning the carrels, then sat down at my desk. My fingers trembled slightly as I opened one of the old diaries. I recognized the handwriting, and one fond memory after another came to mind as my eyes traced the familiar characters.

"Come on. We need to hurry with our preparations. Royalty is going to be here soon."

"Opening door, milady."

“Just a bit more. We’ll be returning to the Sovereignty once the Archduke Conference is over.”

“Work done, milady.”

In the past, the Royal Academy’s library would close after the Archduke Conference, and everyone would move to the palace library. Now, however, there was so much work for me to do here that I could no longer afford to leave. It seemed that the palace library was suffering from a lack of staff as well, although I only knew this through letters. I sincerely hoped that the librarians there were doing well; I only got to see them once every number of years.

My mind continued to wander as I thumbed through page after page, and soon enough, I reached the final entry. The last page was dated the day before the librarians had been taken to the execution grounds, but nobody who read it would guess that—the librarians really had continued to dryly record their workdays until the bitter end.

“Solange, live on and protect this place. I expect that your job will get much, much harder than it ever has been.”

“Welcome the new librarians who serve in our stead.”

“Indeed. As guardians of knowledge, our birthplace has no meaning. All that matters is one’s respect for humanity’s wisdom.”

They had entrusted me with Schwartz, Weiss, and the library... but I had not been able to protect them all on my own. The two shumils eventually stopped working when they ran out of mana, I was forced to decrease the number of active magic tools, and it became more and more of a struggle to get borrowed documents back on the shelves.

But now...

Now, Schwartz and Weiss were working with me again. Lady Rozemyne’s prayers to Mestionora had produced the lights of a blessing. I wondered how moved my fellow librarians would have been, had they been alive to see life return to the shumils.

“Everyone. Oh, everyone... I am doing well,” I said, speaking to the diary. “I am still alive, but... no librarians have come to serve in your place.”

Of course, there was no response.

“Finished, Solange.”

“Done for the day.”

Schwartz and Weiss returned to my office after cleaning the carrels. I welcomed them as I closed the old diary, which they stared at quizzically and with their heads tilted.

“For milady? Reading?”

“For milady? Writing?”

They recognized the diary as something for librarians to write in, so they must have determined that I was giving it to Lady Rozemyne for her to make her own entries in. I giggled and shook my head. “No, I simply thought that I might like for her to read it. Perhaps I can allow her to borrow it during a tea party at the library next year. Lady Rozemyne said that she wishes to become a librarian, so she would surely enjoy reading about their daily lives.”

I wanted someone to share these memories with, even if only for a brief moment. The strength of these feelings had driven me to voice my intentions, and although I was mostly talking to myself, Schwartz and Weiss began to eagerly hop around.

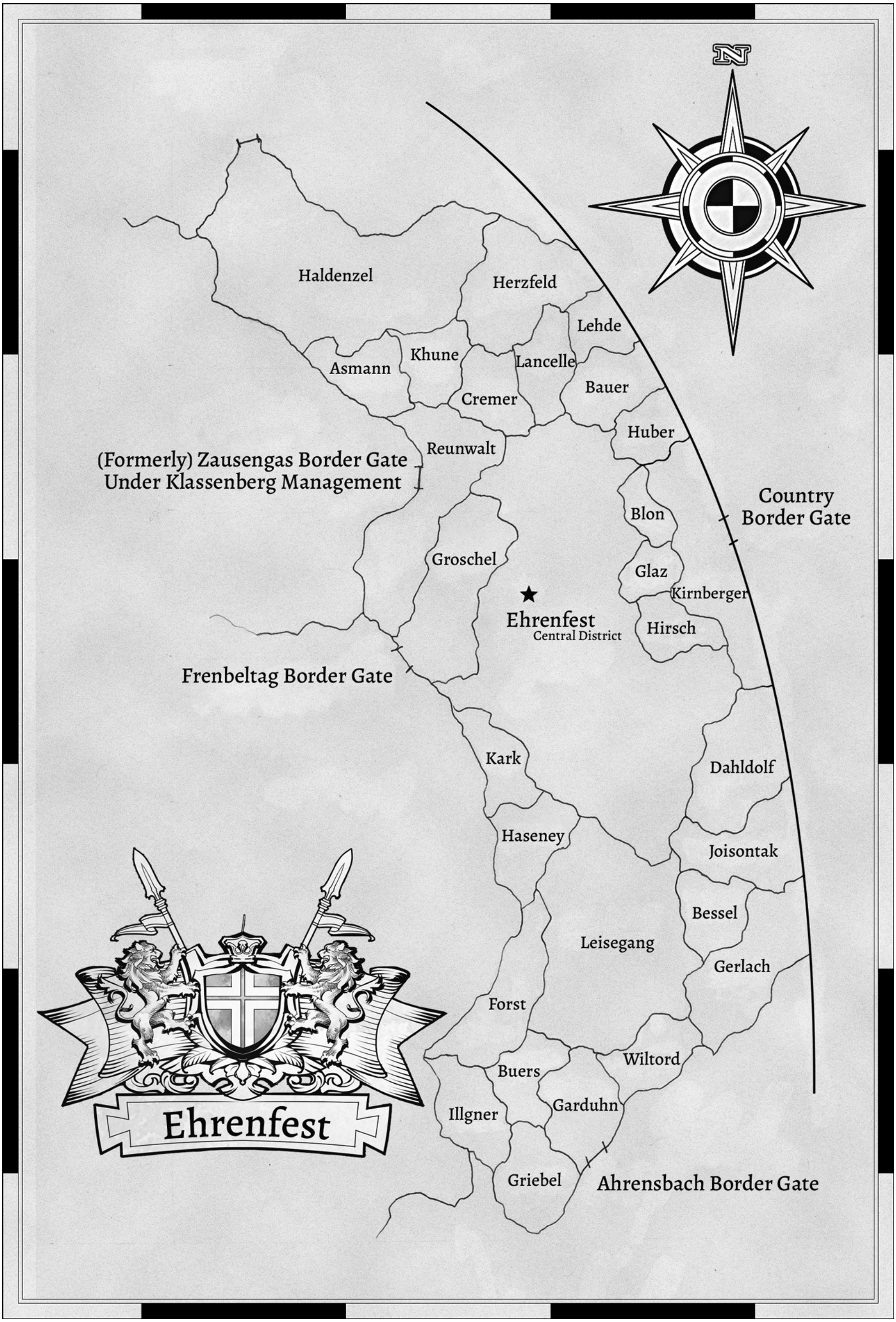
“Milady loves books.”

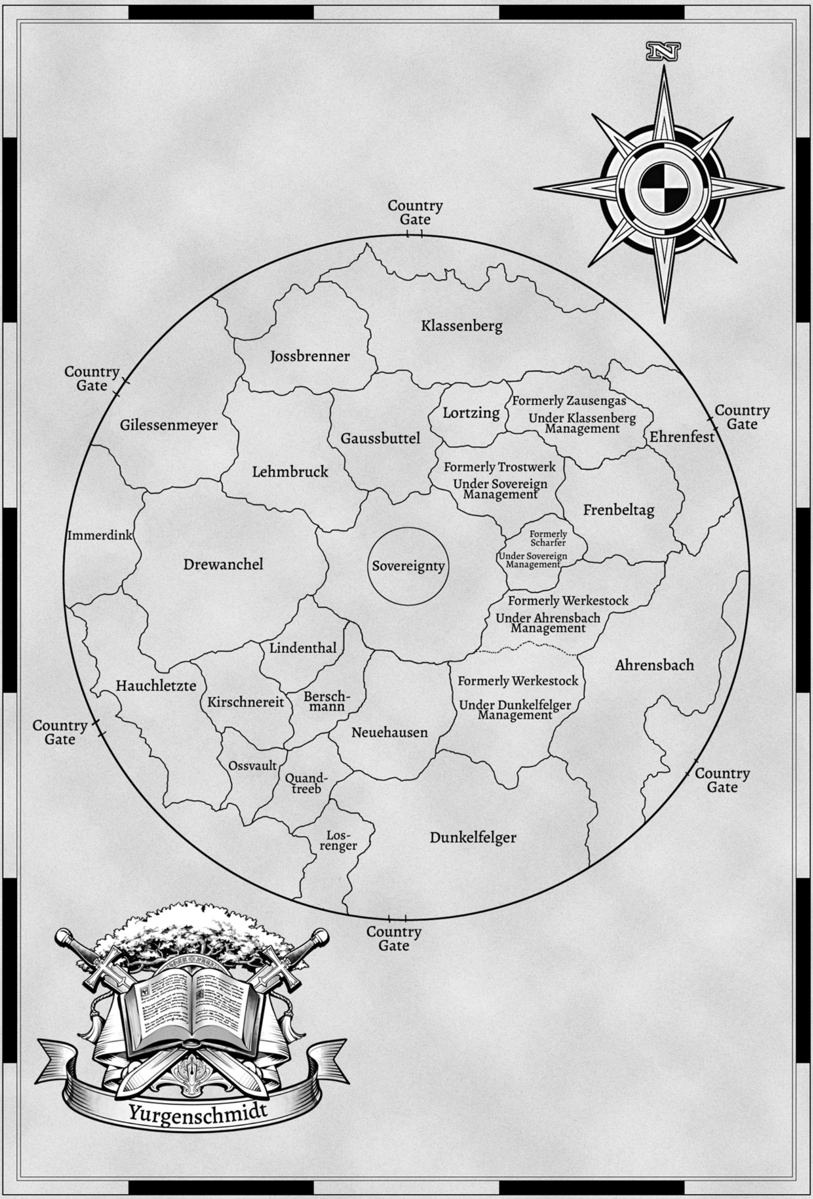
“Milady very pleased.”

Having received the shumils’ approval, I decided that I would give Lady Rozemyne the diary to read. I opened a locked drawer, stored the book inside, then took out a feystone filled with her mana.

“Schwartz. Weiss. Let me supply you with mana.”

May these peaceful days last as long as they can.


N
Haldenzel
Herzfeld
Lehde
Asmann
Khune
Lancelle
Cremer
Bauer
Huber
Reunwalt
(Formerly) Zausengas Border Gate
Under Klassenberg Management
Country
Border Gate
Blon
Groschel
Glaz
Kirnberger
Ehrenfest
Central District
Hirsch
Frenbeltag Border Gate
Kark
Dahldolf
Haseney
Joisontak
Bessel
Leisegang
Gerlach
Forst
Wiltord
Buers
Illgner
Garduhn
Griebel
Ahrensbach Border Gate
Ehrenfest


N
Country Gate
Klassenberg
Jossbrenner
Country Gate
Gilessenmeyer
Lortzing
Formerly Zausengas
Under Klassenberg Management
Country Gate
Ehrenfest
Gaussbuttel
Lehmbruck
Formerly Trostwerk
Under Sovereign Management
Frenbeltag
Immerdink
Drewanchel
Sovereignty
Formerly Scharfer
Under Sovereign Management
Formerly Werkestock
Under Ahrensbach Management
Lindenthal
Ahrensbach
Hauchletzte
Kirschnereit
Berschmann
Formerly Werkestock
Under Dunkelfelger Management
Country Gate
Neuehausen
Ossvault
Quandtreeb
Country Gate
Losrenger
Dunkelfelger
Country Gate
Yurgenschmidt

Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Royal Academy Stories: First Year*, the first published collection of *Ascendance of a Bookworm* short stories.

This volume covered a variety of events from Rozemyne's first year at the Royal Academy that she didn't witness for herself. The inspiration struck me partway through March, as I was putting together Part 4 Volume 3. I really wanted to include the Hannelore short story from my Narou page, but it was much too long for print. And then it occurred to me—if putting it in the main series isn't an option, why don't I just put together a side volume? Thus, *Royal Academy Stories: First Year* was born!

Of course, the hard part was actually making the volume; I ended up having to write a ton of original content, which was pretty rough. I decided to choose requests for Part 4 Volume 1, Part 4 Volume 2, and Part 4 Volume 3 short stories that I hadn't ended up going with for the main series.

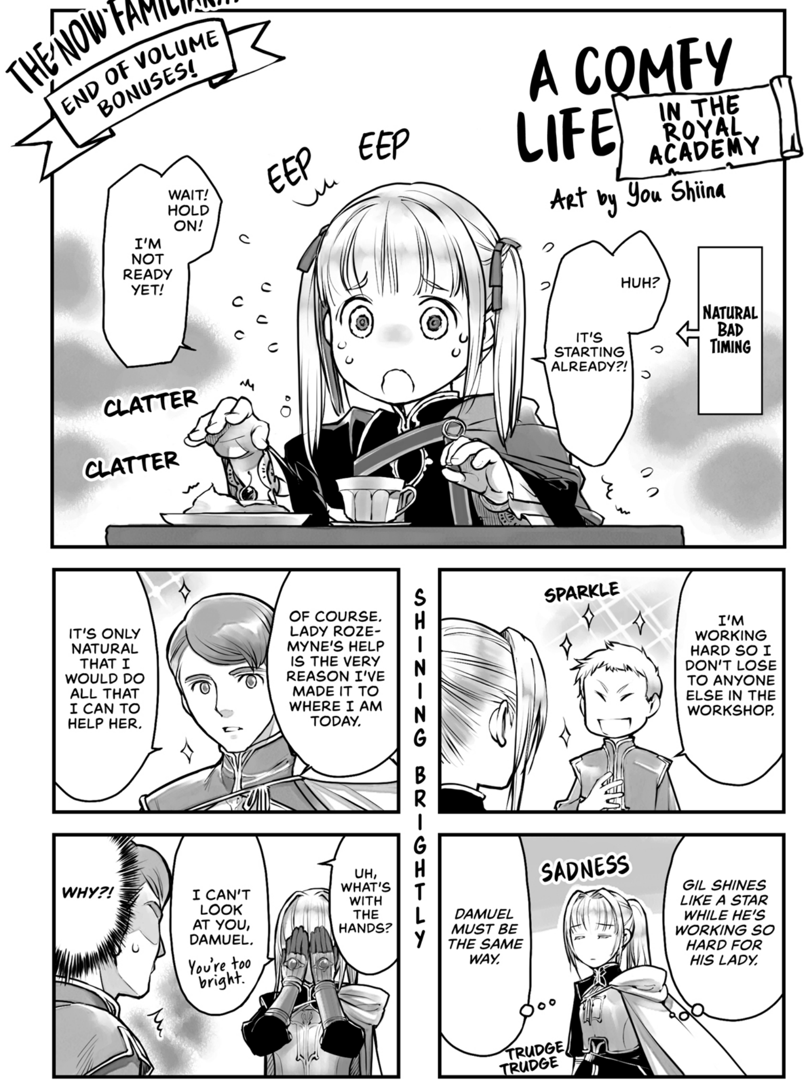
Out of the eighteen short stories featured in this book, ten were original content. I also added quite a lot to some of the stories from my Narou page. It certainly was a challenge; many of the characters had never received their own chapters before, and one of my Hannelore stories had to be expanded into two for the sake of pacing. Dare I say I worked pretty hard. Go me!

That said, it was surely Shiina You-sama who worked the hardest of all. She designed six whole characters for this volume who hadn't yet received illustrations in the main series. These were Roderick, Rauffen, Clarissa, Cordula, Ortwin, and Adolphine. Cordula didn't actually show up in any of the pictures in the end, but she received a sketch nonetheless.

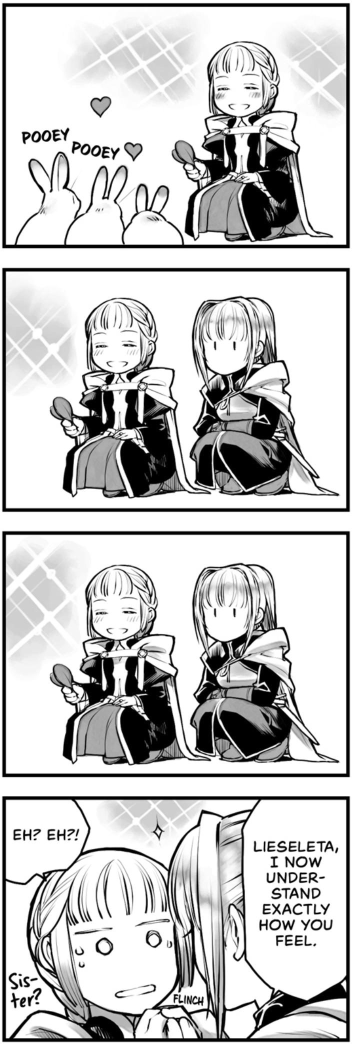
Then there's the cover art, which shows four first-year archduke candidates. This cover seems to be the fanciest and most colorful one yet, with the pinks and purples matching Hannelore's and Ortwin's hair colors. The color art is equally amazing and overflowing with narrators not featured on the cover. Don't miss the four-panel manga either, which are super cute as always. Shiina You-sama, thank you.

And finally, I offer up my heartfelt thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 4 Volume 5 and in the third fanbook.

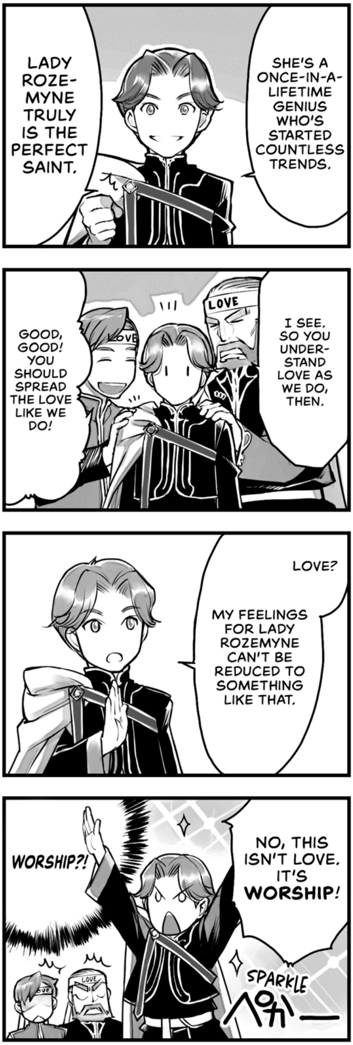
August 2018, Miya Kazuki


THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME BONUSES!
A COMFY LIFE IN THE ROYAL ACADEMY
Art by You Shiina
NATURAL BAD TIMING
HUH? IT'S STARTING ALREADY?!
EEP EEP
WAIT! HOLD ON! I'M NOT READY YET!
CLATTER CLATTER
SHINING BRIGHTLY
SPARKLE
I'M WORKING HARD SO I DON'T LOSE TO ANYONE ELSE IN THE WORKSHOP.
SADNESS
GIL SHINES LIKE A STAR WHILE HE'S WORKING SO HARD FOR HIS LADY.
DAMUEL MUST BE THE SAME WAY.
TRUDGE TRUDGE
OF COURSE. LADY ROZEMYNE'S HELP IS THE VERY REASON I'VE MADE IT TO WHERE I AM TODAY.
IT'S ONLY NATURAL THAT I WOULD DO ALL THAT I CAN TO HELP HER.
UH, WHAT'S WITH THE HANDS?
I CAN'T LOOK AT YOU, DAMUEL. You're too bright.
WHY?!

FEEDING


POOEY
POOEY
LIESELETA, I NOW UNDERSTAND EXACTLY HOW YOU FEEL.
EH? EH?!
Sister?
FLINCH

THE CHURCH OF ROZEMYNE


SHE'S A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME GENIUS WHO'S STARTED COUNTLESS TRENDS.
LADY ROZEMYNE TRULY IS THE PERFECT SAINT.
I SEE, SO YOU UNDERSTAND LOVE AS WE DO, THEN.
LOVE
LOVE
GOOD, GOOD! YOU SHOULD SPREAD THE LOVE LIKE WE DO!
LOVE?
MY FEELINGS FOR LADY ROZEMYNE CAN'T BE REDUCED TO SOMETHING LIKE THAT.
NO, THIS ISN'T LOVE. IT'S WORSHIP!
WORSHIP?!
LOVE
LOVE
SPARKLE

Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Ascendance of a Bookworm: Royal Academy Stories - First Year
by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof
Edited by Kieran Redgewell

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2018 Miya Kazuki
Illustrations by You Shiina
Cover illustration by You Shiina

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by TO Books, Tokyo.
This English edition is published by arrangement with TO Books, Tokyo
English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: July 2022
Premium E-Book for a book